"TIL THE WHEELS FALL OFF:" A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF CULTURAL CENTER STAFF DURING THE ANTI-DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION MOVEMENT

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

LATIKA JOHNSON

Dr. Lisa Dorner, Dissertation Supervisor

MAY 2024

© Copyright by Latika Johnson 2024

All Rights Reserved

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

"TIL THE WHEELS FALL OFF:" A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF CULTURAL CENTER STAFF DURING THE ANTI-DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION MOVEMENT

Presented by Latika Johnson,
a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Lisa Dorner, PhD

Dajanae Palmer, PhD

Michael Williams, PhD

Antonio Castro, PhD

Dedication

This study is dedicated to cultural center staff. For it is the centers and the staff within them that made this study possible.

Acknowledgements

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11

This academic journey was fueled by the support of my family and loved ones. To my dad, Undra Johnson, thank you for always supporting my dreams and goals. It is your love, encouragement, and belief in me that has guided me through this journey. I am eternally grateful for your support.

I want to say thank you God for my praying mom, Serena Henson. Your understanding and encouragement throughout this journey edified me daily. Thank you for never "charging it to my heart" when I was unavailable or if something slipped my mind. Thank you for always believing in me; you have always told me I can do anything I set my mind to because the limit does not exist.

Thank you to my siblings – Shanita and Michael – for your support during this journey. Thank you to my friends within and outside of higher education and student affairs for your encouragement. Thank you, G. Your love, support, encouragement, and care held me down throughout this process.

A special thank you to my dissertation committee: Dr. Lisa Dorner, Dr. Dajanae Palmer, Dr. Michael Williams, and Dr. Antonio Castro. Thank you for your understanding, grace, and belief in my scholarship, research agenda, and timeline to complete this academic milestone. Each of you encouraged and challenged me to appreciate existing scholarship and to critique it in ways that would give rise to my voice as a budding critical scholar. Your insight, experience, and thoughtfulness has been invaluable throughout this process.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction 1
Background of the Study 3
Study Purpose 4
Study Framework and Methods 5
Significance of Study 6
Organization of Study 10
Definitions of Key Terms and Language Usage 11
Chapter Two: Literature Review 16
Critical Race Theory 16
Critical Race Theory Tenets 17
Counternarrative 21
An Introduction to a Critical Race Analysis of Cultural Center Staff Experiences 23
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education 27
DEI Initiatives at Predominately White Institutions 31
Diversity 32
Equity 35
Inclusion 36
Cultural Centers at Predominately White Institutions 40
Emergence of Black Cultural centers 41
Emergence of Multicultural Centers 45
Diverging Interests: BCCs versus MCs 47
Literature Review on Present-Day Operations of Cultural Centers 48
Cultural Center Operations 50
Challenges Facing Cultural Centers 53
Relevance and Validity 54
Concerns of Separatism 56
Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies in Higher Education 59
A Snapshot of Anti-DEI Bills 61
Chapter Summary 62
Chapter Three: Methodology 64
Positionality 64
Research Design 68
Narrative Inquiry 69

Critical Race Methodology ... 71
Research Methods ... 73
Recruitment Site Context ... 74
Sample Selection ... 75
Participants ... 76
Pseudonyms ... 78
Data Collection ... 79
Data Analysis ... 80
Step 1: Preliminary Analysis ... 83
Step 2: Holistic Content Reading ... 85
Step 3: Initial Coding ... 86
Step 4: Focused Coding ... 89
Step 5: Collaboration ... 89
Step 6: Story Development ... 90
Narrative Analysis ... 90
Trustworthiness ... 92
Study Considerations ... 94
Chapter Summary ... 96
Chapter 4: Findings ... 97
Zahir ... 100
Intentional: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning ... 101
Activating the BCC at X University ... 104
Agenda Items ... 105
Lessons From Mom and Grandmother ... 113
Lessons From Graduate School ... 114
"Where Am I Giving All My Time?:" Defining Moments – Middle ... 116
Purpose, Passion, and Position ... 118
Wipeout: How Institutional Challenges Against DEI Efforts Inform DEI Work Within the XU Black Cultural Center ... 120
"I'm Tired:" How Anti-DEI Discourse Shapes the Spirit ... 127
"Charged:" A Counterstory– End ... 131
Synopsis ... 135
Dr. Monique ... 136
Becoming: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning ... 137
Flash U ... 138

The Awakening: From an Unconscious to Conscious DEI Identity 141
Lessons From HESA – Middle 143
Nobody's Superwoman: "They Expect Everything From Me" 147
Every Day is a "War" 151
DEI Efforts are Just "Band-Aids" 159
Navigating Barriers Facing DEI Efforts 166
DEI is Just a "Buzzword:" A Counterstory – End 171
Synopsis 177
Erik 179
A Helping Profession: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning 179
"Passion Work:" For the Love of HESA 183
Towards a DEI Identity 188
DEI Work is not a Performance – Middle 191
Does it Take All That?: Navigating Changes to DEI Work at BSU 194
Sustaining DEI Efforts in an Anti-DEI State 199
Not Just Talking the Talk: A Counterstory– End 201
"Making a Moses Way" 206
Synopsis 210
Chapter Summary 212
Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion 214
Discussion 214
Cultural Centers: Fixtures of the Permanence of Racism in Higher Education? 215
Traversing the Perilous Journey Towards Anti-DEI in Higher Education: Whiteness as Property 217
Patchwork: How DEI Efforts Converge With Higher Education Institutions' Interests 220
Counterstories as Resistance 224
Summary of Study 231
Implications for Research 234
Implications for Practice 238
Reflection and Conclusion 241
References 243
Appendix A 265
Appendix B 268

Appendix C 269
Appendix D 270
Appendix E 272
Appendix F 273
Appendix G 275
Appendix H 277
Appendix I 278
Appendix J 280
Vita 282

List of Illustrations

1. Table 1. Participant Profiles ……………………………………………...….. 77

2. Table 2. Story Element Examples ……………………………………………… 87

3. Figure 1. Nasheeda et al. (2019) Multimethod Restorying Framework ……..… 82

4. Figure 2. Adapted Multimethod Restorying Framework ………………………. 87

“TIL THE WHEELS FALL OFF:” A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF CULTURAL CENTER STAFF DURING THE ANTI-DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION MOVEMENT

Latika Johnson

Dr. Lisa Dorner, Dissertation Supervisor

Abstract

Formalized diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been implemented at predominantly white institutions over the last 50 years to address student demands for equitable campus environments, changing student demographics, and to comply with federal law. This narrative inquiry explored how DEI staff in cultural centers storied their lived experiences while working in a DEI designated space during this political time when DEI is under attack. Guided by the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT) and in using the CRT tenet of counterstorytelling and critical race methodology as analytic frameworks, this study amplified the voices of cultural center staff, a group that is often excluded or limited in scholarship about cultural centers. Three participants engaged in three semi-structured interviews. The findings highlighted the participants' career trajectories and pivotal moments that led to their roles in cultural centers; how these experiences informed the development of a DEI identity; and counterstories about how the sociopolitical climate around DEI shaped, if at all, their work in their cultural center and beyond.

Chapter One: Introduction

Higher education institutions are not known for their diversity, equity, and inclusion for all. After more than 200 years since the founding of the first United States higher education institution, Harvard University in 1636, is when historically excluded groups such as women, Indigenous, and Black students began gaining access to higher education (Thelin & Gasman, 2017; Wilder, 2013). As such, higher education institutions in the US have been shrouded with a historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion. In the summer 2020, after the merciless murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans because of police brutality, many people protested for racial justice here and around the world (Easley & Williams Shealey, 2023). The cries resounded across all sectors of society, including higher education wherein many institutions began to quickly disseminate statements of support for their Black students and Students of Color. Institutions also reiterated their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

However, at the same time in the fall of 2020, then President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning diversity training in the federal government, its contractors, subcontractors, and grantees (Fuchs, 2020). The order was a veiled attempt to quiet any discussions or notions of racism and sexism in the founding of and current culture of US society. Three years later in 2023, the US Supreme Court ruled that race-conscious admissions (i.e., affirmative action) were unconstitutional. Many higher education institutions used race-conscious admissions to balance the compositional diversity or racial/ethnic diversity of their campuses. Leading up to the ruling, several states introduced or passed legislative action that limited or dismantled diversity, equity, and inclusion activities, initiatives, staff, or offices, prohibited diversity statements in

hiring or admissions processes, and banned mandatory diversity training, among other limitations (Easley & Williams Shealey, 2023; Bryant & Appleby, 2023; Lu et al., 2023; The Education Trust, 2023). Easley and Williams Shealy (2023) noted such laws hindered higher education institutions from "developing policies, practices, and cultures of diversity and inclusion," which emphasizes a "divided mindset" (p. 12). New policies that suggest diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are unnecessary or exclusionary push underrepresented groups (e.g., Students of Color, gender diverse groups) further into the margins and limits or bans the staff who are responsible for extending support to them.

Moreover, these anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies are contrary to espoused university commitments to these initiatives. Thus, higher education institutions will have to reconcile how they can continue to advance their diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda *and* be in compliance with policies to the contrary. While thinking about this paradox I am transported back to summer 2020 when an administrator in the division I worked in emailed me to change the language on the division's website regarding "mandatory diversity training." Prior to then President Trump's executive order going into effect, changes in DEI work rippled across universities and colleges. This study focuses on concerns I have for the chilling effect anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation is having on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as a whole, and more specifically how such legislation is informing how staff within cultural centers are addressing these challenges. The concern I have for diversity, equity, and inclusion being used as a political apparatus to advance agendas of color-evasiveness, race neutrality, post racialism, and other ideologies and systems of privilege, undergirds this study.

Background of the Study

In the 1960s, Black students held protests to hold higher education institutional leaders accountable for a negative and hostile campus climate (Sanders, 2016). One solution to address these concerns was the demand for the establishment of cultural centers and minority affairs offices (Patton, 2010). In response, some institutions created minority affairs offices or a position that was responsible for supporting Black students. "These positions and offices were used to restore campus order, offer specialized services, provide a place where African American students could express concerns, and to assist these students with their college adjustment and development" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 175; see also, Sutton, 1998). Other protests led to the development of Black studies programs and similar academic programs, majors, and courses (Rogers, 2012). By the 1980s and 1990s, institutions began to implement academic diversity courses, the hiring of chief diversity officers, and the establishment of multicultural centers (Patton et al., 2019; Williams, 2005). However, some 50 years after the establishment of diversity initiatives, curriculum, and practices, staff and resources related to diversity, equity, and inclusion work are continually experiencing challenges.

Pointedly, cultural centers were created as safe spaces for Students of Color, yet they are often treated as entities that do not align with institutional missions and are perceived as "non-essential or perceived to only provide cultural and social programming" without academic benefits (Patton et al., 2019, p. 178). Viewing these concerns from a wider lens illuminates that cultural centers fall under the umbrella term of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Importantly, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education are under attack and are being marred by narratives that

paint these initiatives as exclusionary, unnecessary, limiting, and discriminatory (Wood, 2023; Cliburn, 2023). As a result, some state legislatures and institutions have implemented policies to limit diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on public college and university campuses. In light of legislative action – which includes the introduction of 82 bills (12 of which have been signed into law) – some support for these initiatives within higher education is waning or being reimagined to succor political agendas.

In this light, the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion staff, specifically those within cultural centers, often goes unacknowledged. Research tends to focus on the history of, student experiences with, and benefits of cultural centers, negating the experiences of the staff who work and lead these centers (Patton, 2006a; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Shuford, 2011; Young, 1991; Hypolite, 2020; Hypolite, 2022). While the aforementioned elements are designed to understand how cultural centers work and whom they support, excluding or limiting the voice of cultural center staff furthers the notion that diversity work is a "banging-your-head-on-the-brick-wall job" that is only supported if it aligns with previously espoused vague institutional values of "engagement" and "commitment to excellence" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 26). In considering the under-researched population of cultural center staff and the experiences they have within cultural centers; research is needed to address how cultural center staff address challenges to their work in this political climate.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and stories of cultural center staff at predominately white institutions. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, such as cultural centers, are being defunded across the United States and

facing other barriers (e.g., dissolvement, lack of funding). This study will examine how center staff who work at predominantly white institutions make meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion work; how this work informs their development of diversity, equity, and inclusion identity; and how counternarratives can be used to challenge questions of relevance and validity aimed at cultural centers in the face of growing anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse within the higher education landscape. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff members within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?
2. How do these experiences shape staff members' DEI identity and work?
3. How does the current political environment, including anti-DEI policies across the United States inform, if at all, the work of DEI staff within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?

Study Framework and Methods

In recent years, critical race theory (CRT) has become a trending topic in mainstream media and was the subject of 563 anti-CRT measures proposed between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2022, with nearly half – 241 – enacted or adopted (Iati, 2023; The Conversation, 2023; Waxman, 2023, para. 3). CRT, a framework used across academic disciplines, with roots in critical legal studies, centers the analysis of racism in social structures within US society. Central to the CRT framework from a legal scholarship perspective is that laws in the US were and are created to maintain systems of oppression and social inequities against marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1988). In education, CRT was introduced to illuminate issues of race and racism in educational

systems (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). "Nevertheless, the normalcy and permanence of racism, a tenet within CRT, could serve as an explanation of both the intentional and unintentional misunderstanding of the theory by critics" (Wallace & Ford, 2023, p. 3). CRT will serve as theoretical framework for this study as it will help underscore the challenges against initiatives and positions (e.g., DEI positions) that have historically and contemporarily served and been filled by minoritized and underrepresented groups.

In addition, I will use narrative inquiry as my methodological approach. Narrative inquiry is generally defined to understand the lived experiences of research participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The focus is on people and their experiences in social, cultural, economic, institutional, and other contexts (e.g., education, career). (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Bruce and associates (2016) presented narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as story and a way of thinking – through storying" (p. 2). This approach provides the space for nuanced storytelling and understanding of participants' lived experiences as opposed to decontextualized truths (Wang & Geale, 2015). Narrative inquiry also lends itself to counterstorytelling, a CRT tenet, as participants will have the ability to push against dominant narratives about diversity, equity inclusion staff, initiatives, and principles in higher education institutions.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study will extend to research and practice for higher education and student affairs professionals. By exploring cultural center staff, I will add to the limited research on this population by providing a better understanding of how center staff understand the work they do and examine how cultural center staff address anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. Cultural centers, specifically Black cultural

centers, were established at the behest of student activists at predominately white institutions across the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Young, 2005). The 1990s saw a rise in the creation of multicultural centers and the merger of identity-specific centers (i.e., Black cultural center) to multicultural centers (Patton, 2006a). However, throughout all the iterations of cultural centers, there is limited research on how the staff who operate these centers experience the centers; understand and contextualize the work of these centers; and navigate challenges facing these centers in a society that is questioning the necessity of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within higher education.

It is important for this study to give cultural center staff space to create their own narrative, as their work is inextricably linked to the students they serve. While the goal of this study is not to validate the relevance of cultural centers, and the role they play in supporting students – especially underrepresented student populations – these sentiments may be addressed in the literature review and the findings of this study. The goal of this study, however, is to highlight the experiences of cultural center staff and how these experiences intersect and inform how center staff address anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse and policies. Furthermore, while there is research about cultural centers and the students who utilize their services (Hypolite, 2020; Hypolite, 2022; Patton, 2006b; Patton, 2010; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Pittman, 1994; Princes, 2005; Shuford, 2011; Strayhorn et al., 2012), there is limited research on cultural center staff that unlinks them from the student experience. There is a lack of research on the staff that operate the centers and their stories regarding the successes, changes, and challenges of cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. It is imperative to centralize the

stories of the cultural center staff, particularly at a time in which their voices are being silenced, to demonstrate *how* cultural center staff employ and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion at the university in which they work.

In addition, reiterating the origins of cultural centers and the populations they serve (e.g.., women, LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, religious groups, low-income students), research that amplifies the voices and the experiences of cultural center staff will be at the center of this work, highlighting an often ignored and silenced group. Cultural center staff are the heartbeat of these centers and will be silenced no more. This study aims to bring awareness to how cultural center staff make meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the current push against maintaining such programs on higher education campuses.

Moreover, the stories in this study will challenge higher education and student affairs professionals to grapple with how they will continue to support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in this current political climate. Results could support the creation of professional development or new institutional policies, which could help them navigate challenging terrain, hold true to their stories and students, while they also act in compliance with policies and state legislation that may prohibit or limit the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion staff and their centers, offices, and units.

Significance for Research

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge base of higher education research on cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions. In this study, cultural center staff members' stories will be the focus, highlighting their experiences in these centers and how these experiences shape their identity as diversity, equity, and inclusion

professionals in the current political climate – where in some cases there are actors actively working to discredit their work and to dismantle their centers and similarly situated efforts. This study will emphasize the experiences of staff with marginalized identities; therefore, it has the ability to add to the body of research on the ways in which people from marginalized backgrounds address policies or other political measures that are counter to higher education institutions' goals and commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Further, the emphasis on cultural center staff may also illuminate local or institutional challenges in complying with state legislation that will undoubtedly impact different types of higher education institutions in distinct ways. Notably, diversity divisions that are independent of student affairs and related offices (e.g., multicultural engagement, diversity, equity, and inclusion offices) that lead an institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives will experience these challenges differently. As such, this research will highlight the intricacies of change across cultural centers as experienced by the staff within them.

Significance for Policy and Practice

Currently, most legislative action aimed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education (and other sectors) is occurring at the local and state levels. Therefore, this study has significance for future policy and practice at the institutional level. Findings may provide diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators (e.g., chief diversity officers, vice presidents of diversity, equity, and inclusion, vice presidents of student affairs, vice chancellors for student services, related university administrators) with information about the experiences of cultural center staff that informs their daily work and well-being. Generally, diversity, equity, and inclusion staff come from

marginalized identities, thus, study findings may bring attention to challenges they face in navigating social justice issues from positionalities that are also being impacted. As such, chief diversity officers may use information from this study to strengthen or develop employee support mechanisms (e.g., options to work from home a few times a month, (re)introducing employee assistance programs for mental health, psychological services). Further, findings may also reveal questions or confusion about how to implement (new) policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Chief diversity administrators may use this information to open a dialogue with their employees about any change(s) and provide space for employees to share their concerns, ask questions, and process their feelings.

The findings from this study may also be considered by diversity, equity, and inclusion staff members who are in entry- to- mid-level positions. These professionals may use these findings to bolster their interpersonal relationships with other diversity, equity, and inclusion staff, as a way to love on and encourage their fellow colleagues in this work. In her work on diversity professionals, Ahmed (2012) described diversity work as “banging-your-head-on-the-brick-wall job” (p. 26). Yet, diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals continue to do this work. The findings in this study may also offer some solace to those dedicated to this work and validate their experiences.

Organization of Study

In chapter one, I introduced the topic of the study, the research questions, significance of the study, and important key terms and rationale for language usage. In chapter two I offer an overview of the theoretical framework for this study – critical race theory. Then I review and synthesize literature relevant to the study including the history

and conceptualization of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education; the history of cultural centers at predominately white institutions; and challenges facing these centers including anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. Then, I highlight a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of cultural center staff. In chapter three, I provide the methodology and research design for this study. In chapter four I present the study findings underscored by the three research questions. Lastly, in chapter five I offer a discussion of the findings, implications for higher education research and practice, and link the findings to critical race theory, and then conclude this dissertation.

Definitions of Key Terms and Language Usage

- **Anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies/legislation:** Federal, state, and local (e.g., institutional) polices and legislation aimed at limiting or prohibiting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in hiring and promotions practices, scholarships, college access and choice, diversity training, use of federal and state appropriations, teaching, instruction, and discussions.
- **Capitalization:** I will capitalize all minoritized racial and ethnic groups in this study. Inspired by the work of Yosso (2005) on Students of Color and community cultural wealth and Huber's (2008) work on critical race *testimonio*, I will also capitalize Administrators of Color, Communities of Color, People of Color, Professionals/Staff of Color, and Students of Color. Capitalizing minoritized racial and ethnic groups represents a "racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships" (Dumas, 2016, p. 12-13). This move also represents a "grammatical move towards social/racial justice and empowerment" (Huber, 2008, p. 15).

Additionally, in referencing the current numerical majority racial group in the United States, white, will not be capitalized. In my study white will be "employed almost solely as a negation of others" (Dumas, 2016, p. 13). The choice to not capitalize the white racial group is intentional insofar as to decenter dominant narratives that maintain hegemonic structures that are often white, heteronormative, and patriarchal, for example (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

- **Counternarratives:** A term used interchangeably with counter-storytelling and counterstories, counternarratives are the telling of stories from the perspective of people whose experiences are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 32).
- **Cultural centers:** An institutional department or office within a division of student affairs/services or division of diversity, equity, and inclusion or related functional area. This department is funded by a higher education institution to meet the needs of historically marginalized student populations (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, gender identity – e.g., women, transgender) and offers services to support students' academic, social, professional, cultural, and personal development needs (Patton, 2010).
- **Cultural center staff:** Cultural center staff are individuals who work within a cultural center. Staff can include full-time staff, graduate assistants, student workers, and student ambassadors who may or might not receive compensation. For the purpose of this study, cultural center staff are full-time employees and graduate assistants with a minimum of one year experience working in a cultural center at predominately white institutions.

- **DEI:** An acronym that stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this study, DEI refers to institutional/campus practices, policies, and cultures that exist to correct or address inequities and inequalities within higher education institutions.
- **DEI efforts:** DEI efforts, used interchangeably with DEI initiatives are formalized efforts/initiatives within higher education institutions that were and are created as a response to federal legislation (e.g., Higher Education Act of 1965), student demands (e.g., student protests stemming from the Black Lives Matter Movement of the 2010s), and the increase of Students of Color on predominately white campuses (Patton et al., 2019). These initiatives refer to those that were created to support students, staff, and faculty from historically underrepresented populations – such as racial and ethnic minoritized groups (e.g., Black, Latine, Asian American), diverse gender identity populations (e.g., transgender), and individuals with identified disabilities – to enhance diversity, transform inequitable systems, and create welcoming higher education environments for individuals from the underrepresented populations (Patton, 2006b; Young, 1986). Examples of DEI efforts include cultural centers, diversity courses, and ethnic studies. Moreover, *how* DEI initiatives are realized differs from campus to campus, however, in this study, this is how these initiatives will be contextualized. DEI work is also included under this umbrella. DEI work accounts for the daily work, assignments, and projects of DEI professionals/staff who work in a cultural center and/or related office.
- **DEI events/programs:** In this study, DEI events and DEI programs are used interchangeably to describe planned events/programs that are coordinated by DEI

professionals/staff under the banner of a DEI office. DEI events can be one-time, recurring, bi-annual, annual, etc. and cover social, cultural, educational, academic, or professional topics.

- **DEI office/unit:** The term DEI office is used as noun encompassing a unit on a college or university campus that develops programs, events, training, and educational opportunities centering DEI issues. DEI office in this study refers to a university unit that is responsible for DEI initiatives for a university at-large and is situated generally within a division of student affairs/services or division of DEI. These DEI offices are responsible for DEI efforts. Moreover, in this study, cultural centers are DEI offices, however, not all DEI offices are or include cultural centers.
- **DEI professionals/staff:** In this study, DEI professionals or staff refers to full-time employees and graduate assistants who work within a cultural center and/or a cultural DEI office.
- **Higher Education and Student Affairs:** An umbrella term denoting student affairs and student support/services departments, units, offices, and divisions. This term encompasses units that may be outside of student affairs. For instance, a DEI division will fall under the umbrella term of higher education and student affairs, not a division of student affairs. Examples of higher education and student affairs departments include financial aid, career services, student engagement, residential life, and admissions.
- **Identity centers:** Identity centers are “institutionally supported locations for the provision of programs and services related to members of one or more historically

underrepresented groups in higher education" that may or may not have designated space on campus (Renn, 2011, p. 245). In this study, cultural centers are classified as identity centers, however, not all identity centers are cultural centers.

- **Latine:** "Latine is a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino and Latina. This term originated from LGBTQIA+, gender-non-binary, and feminist communities in Spanish-speaking countries. Latine replaces the "a" and "o" with the gender-neutral Spanish letter "e." The letter "e" can be found in gendered Spanish nouns like "estudiante" (student)" (Call Me Latine, 2022, para. 1).
- **Majoritarian narratives:** The term majoritarian narratives is used interchangeably with majoritarian stories. Majoritarian narratives are implicit assumptions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings of a dominant group that persons bring to discussions of race, gender, class, and other forms of privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Critical race theory is the theoretical framework of this study and posits that race is a social construct and is used to explain how racism – a byproduct of race – is embedded in the US legal system, policies, and laws. Critical race theory is used to analyze and critique literature germane to my study and informs my chosen methodology, data analysis, and discussion of findings. Then I synthesize relevant literature related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices and initiatives in higher education, with an emphasis on cultural centers. Next, I review literature on student affairs professionals and their experiences with DEI work due to there being limited literature exploring how anti-DEI policies shape the experiences of cultural center staff. This literature review underscores the crucial need to better understand the narratives of cultural center staff and contemporary challenges facing the cultural centers. My literature review highlights the need for the amplification of stories from the perspective of cultural center staff as they are confronted with a cascade of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse and policies.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) as mentioned in chapter one, was born out of critical legal studies – a school of critical theory that challenges how race and racism impact the US legal system and sustains systems of oppression in social contexts (e.g., law, education) against minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The work of Derrick Bell and a cohort of legal scholars from underrepresented backgrounds – Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Cheryl Harris, Richard Delgado, Patricia Williams, Tara Yosso and others – built the foundation of critical theories of race as their work challenged the

legal system's façade of equity in legal processes and the law (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical race theorists are disruptors who are concerned with exposing and dismantling racist policies and practices that extend protection to dominant groups and seek to sustain the subordination and disenfranchisement of People of Color (Milner, 2008). The legal scholars' research influenced the spread of CRT into other fields such as education, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies (Matsuda, 1991). Bell's (1992) critique of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case used a CRT analysis to challenge the decision as a mirage of racial equity in education. Bell's work is an example of *interest convergence* – a concept that argues social issues benefiting People of Color only occur if dominant society benefits, while Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) seminal research using CRT examined the construction of race, property ownership under capitalist structures, and racism in education to illuminate the impact of the ills of society (e.g., racism) within the US education system.

Critical Race Theory Tenets

Critical race theory and methodology in education includes various tenets or principles that inform CRT scholars' perspectives, insights, pedagogy, and methodology. The following five tenets (Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) are salient for this study and provides a lens in which to conduct a CRT analysis of the literature:

- *The permanence and intercentricity of race.* A CRT approach in education begins with the premise that race and racism are endemic, permanent, and central fixtures in US society. Race and racism are also viewed through the intersection of other marginalized social identities such as gender and class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993).

- *The challenge to dominant ideology.* "A critical race theory challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). CRT scholars argue dominant groups use these claims to shield self-interest, power, and privilege.
- *The commitment to social justice.* CRT is committed to social justice and has a social justice research agenda. This agenda includes the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowering of subordinated minority groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).
- *The importance of experiential knowledge.* CRT acknowledges People of Color bring "legitimate, appropriate, and critical understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" to the educational environment (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). CRT scholars posit that the lived experiences of People of Color and the knowledge they wield are strong elements in methods such as "storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos, testimonios,* chronicles, and narratives" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26; see also Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989, 1993).
- *The transdisciplinary perspective.* CRT challenges "ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, pp. 26-27).

In addition, Capper (2019) offered the following CRT tenets: permanence of racism, whiteness as property, counter-storytelling and majoritarian narratives, interest

convergence, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality (p. 104). For my study, I will focus on the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling. In the CRT perspective, racism is a permanent part of society and has been so since the formation of the US as an independent nation (Capper, 2019). CRT scholars argue racism is ubiquitous and happening "all the time, everywhere, at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels" (Tate, 1997 as cited in Capper, 2019, p. 106). Using this tenant to critique the literature is pertinent because DEI efforts in higher education benefit and support marginalized people (e.g., racial and ethnic minoritized groups, gender diverse groups, minoritized sexualities, low-income). The permanence of racism presents a view to better analyze the experiences of the staff who lead DEI efforts in cultural centers at predominately white institutions. Contextualizing the underpinnings of why these specific initiatives and DEI at-large is under attack illuminates the necessity of exploring cultural center staff and their experiences.

The CRT tenet of whiteness as property details how historically, in the United States, property rights were more valuable than human rights (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Capper (2019) explained that "because of the history of race and racism in the USA and the role of US jurisprudence has played in reifying conceptions of race, the notion of whiteness can be considered a property interest" (p. 104). Property rights in the US originated in the form of racial domination of Black and Indigenous peoples, wherein the conceptions of race and property interacted, created, and sustained racial and economic subordination (Harris, 1993). During chattel slavery, Black people were viewed as objects and subjugated as enslaved peoples and deemed property. Regarding Indigenous peoples,

Harris noted the “conquest, removal, and extermination of Native American life and culture were ratified by conferring and acknowledging the property rights of whites in Native American land” (Harris, 1993, p. 1716). As such, property rights were only extended and legitimated amongst white possession and occupation of land, thus contributing to whiteness as property. The benefits of whiteness were reified through laws that prohibited minoritized Others from accessing social and material privileges while providing those same privileges to individuals socialized as white.

Interest convergence postulates that the arc towards racial equity bends towards justice only when the advancements of People of Color also benefit dominate society. Bell (1980) theorized that when the interests of white, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual men intersect with interests associated with minoritized groups, only then will society at-large see change. In essence, change that benefit social justice causes do not occur because the dominant society has a moral epiphany or acknowledges the ills of society, but rather it materializes because there is a direct benefit to the most privileged among us (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). The benefits for People of Color also benefit those in power which perpetuates the phenomenon of “two steps forward, one step back.” Thus, minoritized groups are in a cycle wherein advances are made and withdrawn if the convergence of interests are no longer perceived as beneficial, which also reinforces the permanence of racism.

The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling or counternarratives amplify the voices of People of Color and recognizes their lived experiences as valid and legitimate (Capper, 2019). Counter-storytelling allows CRT scholars to acknowledge the experiential knowledge of People of Color and center their narratives while moving away from

majoritarian narratives. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) explained whites use majoritarian narratives to “justify, legitimate, and help to maintain the status quo of racial inequities” (p. 298). Therefore, narratives that are counter to majoritarian stories provide space for minoritized groups to refute standpoints that are presented as normative (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Counternarrative

Counternarratives also known as counter-storytelling or counterstories are the “telling of the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 32). Solórzano and Yosso explained counternarratives can be personal stories, composite stories, or other people’s stories. In my study, I will explore other people’s stories – the stories of cultural center staff at a PWIs to learn about the stories they tell regarding DEI work and challenges they face. Counternarratives call into question stances that have been painted as normal or true, thus challenging dominant narrative. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) explained that countestorytelling challenges majoritarian discourses:

> Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups. (p. 27)

The narratives of marginalized people disputes dominate stories that perpetuate hegemonic structures of white privilege – “ a system of opportunities and benefits conferred upon people simply because they are white” – and other oppressive power dynamics (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

The concept of majoritarian stories or master/dominant narratives stem from a legacy wherein racial privilege is storied as a "natural" part of society (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Whiteness as expressed through majoritarian stories include aspects such as "the bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understanding persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 462). Importantly, majoritarian narratives extend beyond racial privilege; they also include stories of gender, class, and other forms of privilege. Thus, majoritarian stories privilege "whites, men, middle/upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). People of Color can also maintain and tell majoritarian narratives. An example of minoritized majoritarian storytelling is Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' stance against race-conscious college admissions. In his concurring opinion, Thomas argued that "the Constitution is colorblind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens" (Gans, 2023, para. 5). Majoritarian stories present themselves as objective and neutral, but they distort and silence the experiences of marginalized people.

Moreover, counternarratives are not just a response to majoritarian stories. If employed in such a limited way "we let it dominate the discourse" (Iketmoto, 1997, p. 136) instead of showcasing the strength of the struggle, survival, and resistance of marginalized groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). DeCuir and Dixon (2004) also noted "by telling their stories in their own words, their counter-narratives allow them to contradict the Othering process, and thus, challenge the privileged discourses" (p. 27). Additionally, a CRT approach centers experiential knowledge of People of Color and challenges dominant ideologies. In focusing on the stories of cultural center staff with

marginalized identities, CRT can help me illuminate and push against anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies that are presented as neutral, but in practice are further marginalizing the students, staff, and faculty who engage with these centers (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018). The stories and counternarratives of the staff who will be or are currently impacted by such legislation can be used to challenge dominant narratives about diversity, equity, and inclusion practice and work within predominantly white higher education institutions.

Moreover, predominantly white institutions tell majoritarian narratives that demonstrate an othering of whiteness in DEI spaces and initiatives and claim that DEI practices foster separatism and exclusion of minoritized groups from the dominant group. Predominantly white institutions also assert that DEI is a central value on their campuses, thereby denoting "social locations of privilege and dominance" as normal and neutral (Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 684; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counternarratives disrupt such narratives and place silenced or marginalized voices at the center. In this study, I aim to amplify the voices of cultural center staff – the individuals charged with advancing DEI missions and spearheading the centers' daily operations, yet whose stories are rarely told in research. The counternarratives of cultural center staff will problematize majoritarian narratives against DEI in higher education and campus commitments to DEI.

An Introduction to a Critical Race Analysis of Cultural Center Staff Experiences

Critical race theory in education challenges racialized norms that take shape as "normative" values and "neutral" social scientific and educational practices (Matsuda et al., 1993). In examining racism and the harms inflicted because of racist hegemonic systems, those harmed can "find their voice" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). In telling

and hearing the stories of individuals who have been marginalized, they become empowered to disrupt the arguments made against them.

Central elements of CRT include confronting concepts of race-neutrality, objectivity, and ahistoricism (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). These concepts, in concert with the permanence and intercentricity of race and the challenge to dominant ideology, work together to illuminate the centrality of race and racism in daily life experiences, especially for People of Color. “The belief that racism is normal, not aberrant, behavior provides necessary context to understanding persistent patterns of racial inequity in higher education” (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 214). The perpetual subordination of People of Color and in turn the sustained prevalence of white supremacy are often covered in the name of colorblindness, meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality and inform the dynamics within higher education. The implications of race and racism in higher education, particularly within spaces that were created to address these issues, plays a major role in how diversity, equity, and inclusion work is deployed, taught, and cultivated on campuses. In her work on diversity practitioners in higher education, Ahmed (2012), she discussed diversity as an institutional practice. For example, diversity language can be used to frame racism or other forms of oppression as deleterious to an institution, in which diversity language is weaponized, bastardized, and used to reaffirm veil commitments to DEI work, recenter majoritarian culture, and place the burden of resolving institutional issues on communities that historically and contemporarily are marginalized on predominantly white campuses (Ahmed, 2012; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

Higher education institutions, with their storied histories and contemporary challenges, operate in ways that marginalize, oppress, emancipate, and empower (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A CRT framework in higher education notes that a social justice agenda to eliminate racism, for instance, will be met with resistance. Institutional change is often connected with interest convergence; alignment of interests can only occur if the majority group is benefiting. Thus, a convergence of interests is fickle. If white institutional leadership perceives there are no more benefits with a convergence, they will abandon it, regardless of the potential harms to minoritized groups (Bell, 1980; Patton et al., 2019).

In their study, Patton et al. offered the concepts of collusion, retrenchment, and organizational inertia to articulate a "two steps forward, one step backward" phenomenon regarding organizational change in higher education. Collusion is the "mindset, attitude, and actions of majoritarian and minoritized peoples in organizations to support, legitimize, and validate oppressive systems and structures" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 181). Retrenchment is "an institutional response to advances in minoritized group representation and influence" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 181). Organizational inertia details the "various means by which organizations passively resist deep change" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 181). Each concept, in tandem, makes up the two-steps-forward-one-step-back cycle of higher education institutions in relation to issues of equity and justice (Patton et al. 2019; Patton, 2016). Therefore, since the inception of contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives such as cultural centers over 50 years ago, gains over time seem volatile as the manifestation of collusion, retrenchment, and organizational inertia stunts the scope for lasting institutional change (Patton et al., 2019).

Critical race theory in education highlights the importance of experiential knowledge from the perspective of People of Color and challenges traditional research paradigms that paint People of Color from a deficit frame (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Cultural centers operate under perceptions of self-segregation, exclusion, separatism, and are often treated as non-essential entities that lack academic benefits and are not in alignment with institutional missions (Patton et al., 2019). Analyzing the centers and the staff who work within them provides space for the staff members' lived experiences and stories to be heard. Using the method of storytelling creates opportunities for the experiences of People of Color to take center stage and serve as a "source of strength" in the research process (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

It is important to place race and racism in both historical and contemporary contexts to challenge ahistoricism and a unidisciplinary focus surrounding these issues. As such, in analyzing the experiences of cultural center staff – a group whose experiences have been silenced, ignored, and suppressed albeit it overtly or covertly in the scholarship about cultural centers – juxtaposing the history and current experiences in these campus entities will underscore contradictions in institutional language and institutional practice of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Critical race theory research guided by transdisciplinary studies (e.g., history, ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, law) helps researchers better understand the conditions of racism, sexism, and classism on People of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

Critical race theory is a theoretical framework that helps scholars understand how the effects of race and racism shape every sector of society and the experiences of People of Color. The theory calls out the normative and neutral disguise of racism, by deeply

examining the ideology of racism and naming racist injuries (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This deep dive also provides space for those injured by racism and other forms of oppression to find community with others who have experienced similar injuries. In the following section, the literature connects the historical and contemporary conceptualizations of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and highlights cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. I will also use the following CRT tenets to critique the literature: permanence of racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, and interest convergence.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

Diversity initiatives can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century when access to higher education became available to groups that were initially excluded (e.g., women) from participating as a response to federal legislation (Thelin & Gasman, 2017). The initiatives and institutions that were created to be in compliance with federal policies at this time were not done so under the banner diversity, equity, and inclusion, but rather the groups that were othered were educated under the separate but equal doctrine. It was not until the mid- to late twentieth century that higher education institutions began implementing formalized diversity initiatives after the passage of federal legislation (e.g., Higher Education Act of 1965) which sought to rectify ills of the past (Patton et al., 2019). It is important to provide historical context for diversity initiatives in the US to better understand the contemporary contexts of such initiatives. In the following section, I offer a brief historical overview of diversity initiatives from the 1860s through the 1970s.

The establishment of state colleges in the West and Midwest to serve the public helped to bring about the Morrill Act of 1862, and the institutions known today as

historically Black colleges and universities have their foundation in the Morrill Act of 1890. The passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 granted federal land – 30,000 acres for each member of the US Senate and the US House of Representatives – to states to finance the establishment of colleges specializing in agriculture, engineering, and military science. The second Morrill Act of 1890 required each state prove race was not a factor in college admissions or establish separate land-grant institutions for Black students (Thelin & Gasman, 2017). During the period when the second Morrill Act was passed, a major conundrum faced the US higher education system: issues of diversity. Hence, between 1860 and 1900 historically marginalized and excluded groups such as women, Indigenous, and Black people began gaining access to higher education.

During the mid-1850s, Black students were able to attend a few Black colleges in the North – Lincoln University (Pennsylvania), Cheyney University (Pennsylvania), and Wilberforce University (Ohio) – that had been established by free Blacks and white abolitionists before the end of the Civil War (Thelin & Gasman, 2017, p. 8). Yet, between 1865 and 1910 additional provisions had to be made for more Black students to access college with the establishment of small Black colleges in the South in many states that had previously been a part of the Confederacy. Northern philanthropic groups such as the Peabody Foundation, Black churches, state governments, and the federal government helped financially support these institutions upon their founding. Importantly, regardless of the Black colleges and universities' religious affiliations, curriculum foci, or leadership funding was irregular and scarce (Thelin & Gasman, 2017).

Moreover, Black colleges and universities were prohibited by state governments from offering graduate programs, advanced work, or first professional degree programs

like law well into the twentieth century (e.g., *Gaines v. Canada,* 1938; *Sweatt v. Painter,* 1950) (Wright, 1988). Additionally, federal monies and private donors of this era also funded higher education access to some Indigenous groups though through Virginia's Hampton Institute, Pennsylvania's Carlisle School for Indians, and the University of North Carolina Pembroke (Jenkins, 2007; Thelin & Gasman, 2017). Crazy Bull and colleagues (2020) also noted Indigenous leaders founded tribal colleges and universities during the late twentieth century. The first tribally controlled higher education institution was established in 1968 to "preserve and teach tribal knowledge, cultures, and traditions" (Crazy Bull et al., p. 24).

In addition, in the decades between World Wars I and II, US higher education became stratified into distinct institutional layers as the prestige and purpose of obtaining a college degree became more apparent (Levine, 1986). Public junior colleges, increased state normal schools and teacher's colleges, and the creation of technical colleges indicated this distinction (Levine, 1986). These strides in diversity efforts during this time primarily focused on eliminating barriers to accessing higher education for women, minoritized racial and ethnic groups, and individuals from economically diverse backgrounds. Thelin and Gasman (2017) noted that by the mid-nineteenth century, women had become formal participants in advanced studies. The founding of female seminaries and female academies offered various courses and instructional programs that extended beyond secondary school. Curricula included formal instruction in the sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and composition – all courses which were associated with undergraduate curriculum (Thelin & Gasman, 2017). Some seminaries also offered courses in social graces which were courses in the "deportment associated with 'finishing

school'" (Thelin & Gasman, 2017, p. 7). Moreover, although these studies did not lead to a bachelor's degree for women, they paralleled the men's colleges in terms of academic rigor. Horowitz (1984) posited the female academies and seminaries did become degree-granting over time, particularly by the 1860s and 1870s.

Furthermore, in the mid-twentieth century the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Title IV of the Civil Rights Act addresses discrimination in programs and activities that receive federal funding which includes public PK-12 schools, colleges, and universities (Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 2023). Simultaneously, the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 was signed into law to ensure every US American, regardless of income or background, could access higher education. The law governs financial assistance for postsecondary and higher education students, scholarships, and work-study programs as well as supports teacher training, community service, and library programs (Tabachnick, 2023). This law also established low-interest federal student loans and in 1972 Pell Grants were created under the HEA. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 required federally funded higher education institutions to ensure those with disabilities had access to higher education. The Morrill Acts, Civil Rights Act, HEA, Rehabilitation Act, and other efforts (e.g., GI Bill) also helped establish varying levels of diversity efforts. However, as institutions became more heterogeneous, individuals who were not men or white, for example, experienced hostilities, discrimination, and conflict within campus life by way of exclusion from campus activities (e.g., social clubs, fraternities), isolation, and academic discrimination (Thelin & Gasman, 2017).

Crucially, at this time higher education institutitons in the US achieved diversity via population-specific or special constituency means, albeit race, ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation (Thelin & Gasman ,2017). As such, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts have had various iterations throughout the history of higher education.

DEI Initiatives at Predominately White Institutions

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education institutions (HEIs) often operate as an institutional practice to achieve goals, advance missions, and address social justice issues, ideally by dismantling policies, practices, cultures, and climates that incubate and sustain inequities (Ahmed, 2012; Kezar, 2010; Patton et al., 2019). Often operating as one unit, DEI efforts generally fall under a dedicated division of DEI or an office/department under a division of student affairs at a HEI. However, diversity, equity, and inclusion are separate concepts and institutions have varying levels of commitment to each independently and collectively. DEI has a checkered past in higher education in the United States. At the inception of HEIs, classrooms were only open to white Christian men from economically privileged backgrounds which illuminates the institutional and systemic racism within which HEIs were founded (Wilder, 2013). The vestiges of the exclusive origins under which higher education institutions were established remain today. The permanence and intercentricity of race and its byproduct – racism – is well documented in the literature. Scholars have studied the disparate and negative experiences of Students of Color at predominantly white institutions with students sharing their experiences with, for example, isolation, racial discrimination, and harsh campus racial climates (Apugo, 2021; Green et al., 2018; Briscoe, 2022a; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Brunsma et al., 2017). For instance, over 50

years after the establishment of Black cultural centers stemming from student protests in the 1960s, higher education institutions are still in the midst of protests spearheaded by Students of Color whose experiences and perspectives have not been addressed or acknowledged (Patton et al., 2019). Notably, staff members who are tasked with implementing diversity initiatives work in environments where progress is relative and conditional. Next, I will conceptualize diversity, equity, and inclusion individually, as each represents a different aspect of higher education.

Diversity

Contemporarily, diversity initiatives are university-led efforts which seek to promote a more diverse campus. Diversity in higher education is often linked to the representation of individuals from various groups on a college or university campus. While structural or compositional diversity is important, understanding campus diversity must go beyond the numbers (Hurtado et al., 1999). Gurin and colleagues (2002) developed a typology of diversity which includes three types of diversity: structural, interactional, and curricular/co-curricular. Structural or compositional diversity refers to the numerical or representation of various populations on a campus (e.g., race, ethnicity, disability, military status, socioeconomic status) (Lewis & Shah, 2021). An example of structural diversity in action is a university's engineering department actively recruiting and admitting more women into its engineering programs. Interactional diversity can be defined by actions, initiatives, and interactions of students from diverse backgrounds interacting with one another on campus (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Interactional diversity is also known as cross-racial interaction or informal intergroup contact. Interactional diversity can occur at a campus-wide social event in which all students are

encouraged to attend, such as events hosted by an institution's campus/student activities board. Activities inside and outside of the classroom that confront issues experienced by marginalized groups or lead to cultural competence and students' engagement with content that explores diverse issues facilitated by an institution is curricular/co-curricular diversity (Milem, 2003). Curricular/co-curricular diversity can be actualized through curriculum, coursework, and activities that promote racial-cultural awareness (e.g., presentations, multicultural courses) (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

Definitions of diversity as a singular concept highlight what and who is considered "diverse." Conversations of diversity in the 1970s and 1980s often focused on underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in higher education (e.g., Indigenous, Black, Latine) (Smith, 2009). Relatedly, the results of affirmative action litigation namely, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), and *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2013, 2016) perpetuated the conceptualization of diversity as a link to race and ethnicity (Foste et al., 2022). Thelin and Gasman (2017) argued:

> As the Supreme Court considered the continued need and constitutional basis for affirmative action policies, the arguments that gained the most traction were rooted in the "diversity rationale," which claims that increasing the number of individuals from diverse backgrounds leads to gains in learning and enhances students' abilities to engage in our increasingly diverse democracy (p. 75).

In concert with this argument, Jayakumar (2008) found exposure to diversity in college was related to more diverse friendships, living in a diverse neighborhood post-graduation, and the development of competencies associated with working in a diverse workforce

(e.g., openness to challenge). Curricular/co-curricular initiatives increase cross-racial and intergroup contact and friendships (Bowman & Park, 2015), democratic involvement (Denson & Bowman, 2013), and students' awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of different racial groups (de Novais & Spencer, 2019).

Conversely, Ahmed (2012) and Case and Ngo (2017) posited that colleges and universities deploy diversity as a "nonperformative" in which they declare the language of diversity and market it as a profitable resource thereby commodifying diversity and diversity-related initiatives. The rationale of diversity as an educational benefit, undergirded by affirmative action litigation such as *Grutter,* flattens diversity as a transactional good. Leong (2013) posited a related phenomenon as racial capitalism as "the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (p. 2153). The prioritization of diversity and its perceived benefits in the form of nonwhiteness is a representation of capital for white people and predominantly white organizations. Leong argued that the diversity rationale has two interconnected paradoxes that are underscored by the reexamination of nonwhiteness. The first paradox is that nonwhiteness in the view of the diversity rationale is only valued in relation to its worth to white people (Leong, 2013). At PWIs, white people "reap the benefits of nonwhite presence in institutions, such as exposure to new ideas and understanding of other cultures" (Leong, 2013, p. 2171). In this light, policies that are implemented to bolster diversity on campus or remedy past ills, for example, cannot solely occur because of the value they may have on nonwhite people. Rather, these diversity policies must be justified by the value they have for white people (Leong, 2013). This is an example of

interest convergence – advancement for People of Color occurring when white people and institutions benefit.

The second paradox presented by Leong (2013) is that the white people and PWIs have the power to decide the value of nonwhiteness in the diversity rationale. The valuation of nonwhiteness stems from the perceived benefits it can bring white people or their experiences; thus, the worth of nonwhiteness is by those wielding the power to make such decisions. Leong noted that while People of Color may benefit from this system (e.g., affirmative action in education), the value of their nonwhiteness is only as valuable as the context in which their nonwhiteness is valued. Put another way, the pendulum swings of the value of nonwhiteness can change course at which point white people and PWIs devalue it. As such the control over the valuation of nonwhiteness is sustained by white people and PWIs. Current examples of this in action via the US legal system is the overturing of race-conscious college admissions and anti-DEI policies levied at dismantling programs and initiatives that supported Students of Color, which in some cases was interpreted as excluding white people. In viewing diversity through this lens, it can be understood that the value of nonwhiteness must converge with perceived benefits to white people and PWIs to be implemented *and* sustained long-term. This conception of diversity also

Equity

The concept of diversity has been a part of the fabric of higher education longer than its related counterparts: equity and inclusion. Diversity rhetoric in higher education emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and centered around discourse regarding race-conscious college admissions and compositional diversity (Jayakumar et al., 2018; Warikoo, 2016).

In an effort to remedy racist historical legacies of exclusion in higher education, institutions increased race-conscious admissions to tackle structural inequities that discriminated against marginalized groups in the 1960s (Berrey, 2011). Thus, the goals of diversity had the potential to address issues of equity as well.

As an example, the education of women at female seminaries and coeducation in the 1800s was a positive change towards providing equitable access to higher education for a marginalized gendered group. The proportion of women in colleges grew from 21 percent in 1869-70 to 36 percent in 1899-1900 (Snyder, 1993). However, once admitted into coeducational spaces, women were discriminated against in the classroom and campus life (Gordon, 1990; Horowitz, 1987). Foste and associates (2022) argued the growing representation of minoritized communities and the response to student demonstrations in the 1960s helped with the establishment of student organizations and campus activist groups. Student activists demanded their institutions begin reflecting the diversity of the student body by implementing initiatives to address their concerns (e.g., hiring diverse faculty and staff; multicultural student organizations) (Sanders, 2016; Hypolite, 2020). It is with this background that higher education institutions were challenged with addressing concerns of equity. Students, regardless of background, needed equitable access to academic and non-academic spaces.

Inclusion

As discussed in the previous section, diversity work is typically concerned with compositional diversity and aims to increase the number of historically underrepresented and marginalized groups in a given space (Gonzales et al., 2021). Equity work “seeks to resolve organizational barriers that impede equitable outcomes for underrepresented

people" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 446). However, inclusion work "attempts to reform organizational cultures and structures so historically underrepresented people might feel a sense of belonging inside the organization" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 446).

As student bodies across the United States became more diverse with the increasing enrollment of minoritized racial/ethnic groups, sexual and gender diverse populations (e.g., lesbian, queer, gay, transgender), veterans, disabled, and other marginalized groups, coupled with the legal challenges against institutions to expand conceptualizations of diversity, higher education institutions were faced with a realization: access alone – an earlier adaptation of diversity initiatives – was not enough (Thelin & Gasman, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2021; Hypolite, 2020). Student protests in the 1960s and 1970s illuminated the lack of equity and inclusion initiatives on higher education campuses. Hence, students demanded the groups that were being recruited to bolster diversity be provided *equitable* access to educational experiences and be *included* in campus life. Students also challenged HEIs to acknowledge and complicate their ties to Eurocentric histories, participation in discriminatory practices, and historical legacies of systemic racism, that for years, excluded, othered, and marginalized individuals who were not a part of the dominant group (e.g.., white, male, heterosexual) (Patton, 2010; Hill et al., 2021; Hernández, 2019).

In many ways, student activists led "cultural changes and pushed their campuses to do more" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 447). For example, in March 1969 the Student Afro-American Society at Rutgers called for a "Black Experience Course" and a $100 a week minimum wage for full-time university employees (McCormick, 1990). In 1973, after Latine students lobbied for a center to provide support for the Latine student

community, La Casa (The House) was established (Hernandez, 2007). Over time, colleges and universities began to respond to the call to ameliorate campus cultures. Some of these efforts include the development of cultural and ethnic studies (e.g., Black/African American/Africana studies, gender and women's studies, Latin American studies); hiring of more diverse faculty and staff; development of DEI workshops and trainings for students, faculty, and staff; the creation of DEI units; and the establishment of dedicated physical spaces on campus for various cultural and ethnic groups (Patton, 2010; Sanders, 2016; Hypolite, 2020). However, there have been varied interpretations and complex emotions associated with broadening equity and inclusion work on college campuses (Thelin & Gasman, 2017, p. 75).

Anand and Winters (2008) contended most inclusion efforts are too short and too shallow to effectively remedy cultural and structural issues deeply embedded within institutions' roots. Diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops/presentations often leave parties involved, for example, racially minoritized people and white people, dissatisfied (Anand & Winters, 2008). White people may leave DEI trainings feeling personally attacked (Patton & Jordan, 2017; DiAngelo, 2016), while People of Color report most trainings provide superficial information about stereotypes to explicate differences among groups, do not confront the historical and contemporary implications of racism, and too often rely on them – members of the non-dominant group – to teach their more privileged peers and colleagues (Harris et al., 2015; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Chang et al., 2019). Relatedly, Vianden (2018) found white students protected whiteness and sustained racist institutional structures while participating in diversity related coursework through resistance in classrooms (e.g., resisted learning about topics of power, privilege,

oppression) and employing white fragility (e.g., need for comfort and lack of stamina around issues of racial oppression) (p. 473). These studies highlight examples of the CRT tenet the challenge to dominant ideology. When members of the dominant group are charged with confronting oppressive systems, they retreat to protect these systems under the guise that institutions operate as colorblind, objective, race neutral meritocracies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These studies underscore the significance of diversity, equity, and inclusion as concepts that must be employed in practice through dedicated staff and faculty at the helm. It is clear DEI requires *action* to cultivate a culture of safety and care wherein truth, healing, and transformation can prosper.

In the previous section I conceptualized diversity, equity, and inclusion and the history of DEI initiatives in higher education. I wish to clarify that I provided a historical overview of DEI as institutional practices and some DEI initiatives to (1) underscore the various forms of DEI across the history higher education in the US; (2) highlight the politicalness of DEI work in higher education; and (3) discuss the enterprise of DEI efforts wherein higher education institutions present as social justice-oriented or antiracist entities while simultaneously not actively and meaningfully dismantling systems that prop up whiteness and maintain racist structures (Abrica & Andrew, 2024, p. 4). Moreover, a DEI initiative born from student protests in the 1960s and 1970s is the establishment of cultural centers. Cultural centers and the staff within them contemporarily operate under the umbrella of DEI. As such, providing a historical foundation for the umbrella unit in which cultural centers are housed was important. Next, I offer an examination of the history of cultural centers on predominantly white

campuses, current cultural center operations, and the experiences of staff who do DEI work more broadly.

Cultural Centers at Predominately White Institutions

The historical foundations of racial and ethnic cultural centers stem from student protests of the 1960s. The growth of racial and ethnic minoritized communities and the influence of the sociopolitical ideologies of the Black Power, Chicana/o, and civil rights movements on college students led to activism on campus (Patton, 2010; Foste et al., 2022). Student activists founded student organizations that called for change on their respective campuses. Broadhurst and Velez (2019) noted student organizations such as Black Student Unions provided students with opportunities to organize and retreat from racist campus climates. As mentioned in the preceding sections, student activists demanded higher education institutions be accountable to their student body to ensure their campuses provided inclusive and equitable opportunities for engagement and participation in curricular and co-curricular spheres for diverse students. Students also called for changes to the curriculum, faculty and staff hiring, student recruitment processes, and the establishment of physical spaces for students (Princes, 2005; Patton, 2006a; Sanders, 2016). These physical spaces became known as cultural centers or cultural houses. Cultural centers have been a part predominantly white campuses for over 50 years, and these centers and other DEI efforts have, as Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) posited, "allowed institutions to tout their support of diversity, making 'diversity' and support for minoritized students institutionalized, or folded into the fabric of institutional life" (p. 280). Black, Latine, Asian American, and Indigenous groups are four main types

of racial and ethnic cultural centers at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Black cultural centers were the first of this kind of identity-based student support center.

In addition, the 1970s and 1980s in higher education is known as the multicultural movement. During this time, student demographics in higher education were shifting on predominantly white campuses and this led to mounting attention to better support other social identities beyond race and ethnicity. Ignited by the federal policies of the time and shifting student demographics, new cultural centers had a more multicultural concentration as they reconceptualized diversity, equity, and inclusion work (Patton & Hannon, 2008). As such, identity-specific centers, minority affairs units, and minority student services became “multicultural centers.” Contemporarily, cultural centers have expanded to support other social identities such as religions, women, sexual orientation, and disability (Thelin & Gasman, 2017; Renn, 2011). In this study, I focused on the staff in Black cultural centers and multicultural centers.

Emergence of Black Cultural centers

Black cultural centers (BCCs) were established on predominantly white campuses as dedicated spaces of rest and refuge from hostile and exclusionary campus environments for Black students. Student demonstrations led to dedicated social spaces, academic programs, and centers devoted to Black identity and culture (Young, 2005). Social movements and the passing of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, created significant changes to the higher education landscape. Although compositional diversity was changing at PWIs, the prejudiced perceptions and attitudes towards People of Color and systems that privileged white people were not changing at the same pace (Kupo, 2011). The perception of and attitudes

towards Black students by white students and other campus constituents on predominantly white campuses illuminates the permanence of racism. During the period when BCCs were being established, Black students faced racialized incidents, discrimination, and were often excluded from campus life (Patton, 2006a, Patton, 2006b). Although Black students' demands to increase Black faculty, the enrollment of more Black students, and to have a gathering place is connected to their desire to see Black culture throughout higher education (e.g., academics, student activities, admissions) (Princes, 2005), these centers cannot be unlinked from their founding wherein Black students' experiences with racism was the catalyst for their demands.

However, Black students wanted to feel like they belonged on their PWI campuses and asserted having their history, culture, and heritage at the center of dedicated social and academic spaces like the BCC and Black studies programs would ideally help to mitigate feelings of isolation and exclusion (Patton, 2006a, Patton, 2006b). Patton (2006a) found Black students connected with the communal energy of BCCs. This energy was something Black students did not feel in other areas of campus including student centers/unions – spaces often heralded as "student hubs." As Black students continued to search for safe spaces on campus, BCCs garnered more visitors because of the communal energy students felt while in the building and because these were designated spaces designed *by* and *for* them.

Black students saw a shift in the zeitgeist of higher education between 1968 and 1971 (Fenderson et al., 2012). In May 1968, over 90 students at Northwestern University occupied the bursar's building for 40 hours. The demonstration was led by For Members Only (FMO) and the Afro-American Student Union (AASU) – Black undergraduate and

graduate student organizations respectively (Fenderson et al., 2012). The occupation was preceded by Black students lobbying for substantial changes to university policies regarding admissions, financial aid, student housing, curriculum, counseling, and student facilities. The demonstration forced white administrators to face issues they had been unresponsive to previously. Around the same time, demonstrations also took place at Columbia University and historically Black colleges and universities Howard, South Carolina State, Texas Southern, Kentucky State, and Shaw (North Carolina), while at Yale University Black students hosted a two-day symposium to discuss campus race relations (Fenderson et al., 2012; Morris, 1968). At each campus demonstration and Yale's symposium, students were calling for changes in the curriculum through the inclusion of Black studies programs (Morris, 1968).

The establishment of Black studies courses was one of many demands put forth by student activists. Fenderson and colleagues (2012) asserted the Black studies movement was also entangled with other progressive and radical social solidarity issues including worker's rights, desegregation, anti-war, anti-militarism, and peace movement activism (p. 7). For example, Northwestern's FMO and AASU made demands for Black studies courses and called out the university's "de facto segregation in the surrounding community of Evanston" (Fenderson et al., 2012, p. 2). Black students in the group, Unity, at Tuskegee University protested to establish a "Black University" and worked to detach US higher education from the military industrial complex by protesting compulsory ROTCs (reserve officer training corps) (Morris, 1968). In another example, James Garrett, the head of one of the United States' first Black Student Unions at San

Francisco State College in 1966 specifically linked the labor movement to the Black student organization's plight on campus (Rogers, 2009).

Therefore, the inherent politicalness of Black studies emphasizes the historical context of its "movement and activist dimensions." The same Black radical origins that influenced the Black studies movement also permeated throughout demonstrations Black students held throughout the US on college and university campuses to address systemic issues of racism, which led to the founding of Black cultural centers. Instead of disassociating BCCs from their political origins, it is important to foreground and situate the history of BCCs in the Black politics of the 1960s and 1970s, as posited by Fenderson and associates (2012). Furthermore, BCCs can be viewed through the lens of the CRT tenet, the commitment to social justice. The formation of BCCs stem from the social justice agenda of student activists who demanded HEIs establish spaces for minoritized groups. However, the current challenges against cultural centers and similar DEI initiatives serve to disempower subordinated groups and conserve practices that advantage majoritarian groups. If these centers were created to succor Black students and further institutions' commitment to inclusive and diverse campus communities, how does allowing these centers to be dissolved or rendered unrecognizable via restructuring demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice if they are ceding to political pressures that are in opposition to the centers' missions?

Black cultural centers at their inception were viewed as "safe havens" by students and staff in an "alien environment" (Young, 1986, p. 18; see also Patton, 2006a). The centers were home to ethnic studies programs, counseling services, academic support, and programs that celebrated Black history and culture (Patton, 2006a). BCCs also helped

with the recruitment of Black students, increased students' development of a positive racial identity, and improved campus climate for Black students (Pittman, 1994; Hypolite, 2020). Patton (2006a) contended Black students' persistence and matriculation at PWIs was in part due to the academic and social resources/services provided by BCCs. Moreover, the creation of BCCs and the budding multicultural movement of the 1980s was the stimulus for multicultural, minority, and other identity-based centers.

Emergence of Multicultural Centers

The multicultural movement of the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century flowed from similar cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s and was grounded in the same ideological underpinnings of the Black Power, Chicana/o, Indigenous, and women's movements, for example (Wilson, 2005). Williams and Clowney (2007) explained these movements included political expression and "embracing ethnic or identity-specific values, politics, traditions, cultures, and behavior" (p. 6). Multicultural centers (MCs) serve as a celebration of the richness and vastness of different cultures and help members of those cultures feel welcomed and included on campus (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

In the 1990s PWIs saw a peak in the enrollment of minoritized students as a result of the diversifying US society. Campuses highlighted a need to offer diversity and multicultural education for students with various intersecting identities. Patton (2006a) posited this move was to centralize student support services assisting with the changing campus demographics. Importantly, institutions grappled with the effectiveness (e.g., time, staffing, funding) of establishing population-specific services as opposed to one umbrella unit that could assist all students. Patton and Hannon (2008) explained many

cultural centers during this time revitalized their commitment to offering services for specific racial and ethnic groups, while other centers dissolved to establish multicultural and minority affairs offices.

Multicultural centers offered support to various underrepresented populations and their intersecting identities and did not have a central focus on one specific identity like BCCs. Universities also began to espouse philosophies of diversity in which understanding and respecting individual and group differences were highlighted (Shuford, 2011). Underscoring this philosophy were programmatic efforts regarding multicultural education for all students and an attention to continuing to support the needs of marginalized students (Shuford, 2011). The programs and opportunities for cross-cultural engagement allowed for more interactional and co-curricular diversity (McShay, 2017; Gurin et al., 2002; Patton & Hannon, 2008).

Moreover, the introduction of the MC can be viewed through an interest convergence lens. MCs were created to serve a myriad of groups from racial and ethnic groups to religious and gender groups. As the population of people attending predominantly white institutions continued to diversify, so too, did the services and resources available to these groups. Put another way, to sustain growth amongst different groups at PWIs, resources were allocated to support these groups. As a student body grows and diversifies, so do appropriations and tuition dollars. Institutions can also be rewarded for their diversity efforts, so this incentivizes institutions to develop new DEI practices and programs which engenders a capitalist market approach to DEI work wherein products can be bought, sold, and consumed.

These multicultural initiatives were also created with intentions to further improve campus racial climate and to educate the campus community about DEI topics (Patton et al., 2019, p. 175). Furthermore, in a contemporary context, the summer 2020 uprisings introduced a wave of new programs, offices, roles and ushered in renewed commitments to DEI. During this time, it was popular to make public statements about DEI and commit to hiring more diverse job candidates, for example; however, almost four years later and DEI in higher education is being challenged or stuck down via state legislation or by institutions voluntarily dissolving their DEI offices like in the case of the University of Arkansas (Knox, 2023).

Diverging Interests: BCCs versus MCs

A critical divergence between the history of BCCs and MCs is that BCCs were created as safe spaces for Black students on predominately white campuses, while MCs were created after other marginalized ethnic groups called for centers similar to that of BCCs (Princes, 1994), which counters the assertion made by Wilson (2005) presented previously. Princes argued that:

> While the outcries were perhaps facilitated in part by the rise of Black Cultural Centers and by the increasing shift in the population demography to more non-European minorities, Black Cultural Centers were the predecessor to multicultural centers… Thus, while fiscal limitations, increasing population diversity, social outcries, and the need for the development of Multicultural Centers, in effect, Black Cultural Centers became role models for and the impetus for the other minority student centers (pp. 20-21).

Hence, there was an underlying understanding that MCs would also address the academic and social development of Students of Color *and* white students. The expansion of MC services to broader audiences helped higher education institutions foster environments in which these campuses at-large could encourage cross-cultural appreciation, increase intercultural dialogue, and cultivate students' leadership development (McShay, 2017; Pittman, 1994; Patton, 2006a).

Another divergence between BCCs and MCs is the inherent politicalness embedded within the establishment of BCCs. In addition to student protests of the 1960s, BCCs were also created because institutions had a vested interest in enrolling more Black students on white campuses and because institutions desired to increase the retention and graduation rates of Black students (Princes, 1994). Notably, some BCCs dissolved into MCs over the years to accommodate wider educational and service orientations for various student identities; this is a transition MC have not faced (Patton, 2006a). As such, the struggle and resistance inextricably linked to the inception of BCCs is different from the wide-ranging goals of multicultural centers. However, today, both BCCs and MCs support students across differences and work to meet students' academic, social, cultural, professional, and personal development needs (Sanders, 2016; Patton & Hannon, 2008). Next, I offer a review of literature on student affairs professionals' experiences with DEI work, present operations of cultural centers, and challenges facing cultural centers.

Literature Review on Present-Day Operations of Cultural Centers

The field of student affairs at its earliest development grew from women faculty members who were concerned about the welfare of female students on male-dominate and oriented campuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schwartz &

Stewart, 2017). Student affairs was created as a response to the "wants of students and their multifaceted needs and concerns, as well as to advocate on their behalf" (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017, p. 36). The field is now a broad profession within higher education and includes roles in DEI units, orientation, career services, residential life, financial aid, admissions, and more. Within the field of student affairs, DEI roles and comparable efforts have expanded along with the establishment of cultural centers and similar offices. Patton et al. (2019) noted that in the 1960s, many higher education institutions began hiring minority affairs directors and created related positions to establish leadership roles for People of Color (p. 180). However, some administrators were not keen to accept the offers as they deemed them undesirable (Poussaint, 1974). After the student uprisings in the 1960s "universities which had been dragging their feet suddenly they were beating the bushes for Black students and making 'deans' out of the first Black with a degree they could get their hands on;" yet, before the protests, universities and colleges were slow to implement DEI efforts (Poussaint, 1974, p. 9). These roles were exploitative in nature – newly hired Administrators of Color were tasked with keeping Students of Color "in line" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 180). Other issues associated with these roles were that they had limited power and influence on campus, lacked funding, and these administrators were overwhelmingly responsible for succoring the concerns of Students of Color (Poussaint, 1974). Some of the remnants of these concerns are still being raised today by individuals in DEI roles within higher education.

As an example, the relationships forged between students and DEI student affairs professionals is crucial to student success. Garcia and associates (2021) noted that in building relationships with students, multicultural student services Administrators of

Color take on caring for and educating students on racial justice issues, while Santa-Ramierz and Wallace (2022) found that Black student affairs professionals navigate personal experiences with racism and other oppressive systems which intensifies the challenges associated with supporting and educating students. The experiences of DEI professionals in student affairs, particularly in cultural centers, are often linked to their work with students (Harris & Patton, 2016; Hypolite, 2020b) which excludes the nuances and complexities of their roles as staff members. Furthermore, there is student affairs research on student affairs professionals' experiences with marginalization such as campus racial climate (Garcia, 2016), isolation (West, 2015), and hostile work environments (Briscoe, 2022b); however, there is an absence of literature that focuses on DEI student affairs practitioners from marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds who work in cultural centers (e.g., Black cultural centers, multicultural centers). Hence, there is a need to expand research on the experiences of cultural center staff specifically. Next, I examine the present-day operations of BCCs and MCs, as these centers serve as the backdrop for this study.

Cultural Center Operations

Research on the present-day operations of Black cultural centers and multicultural centers generally examines the daily work of these centers, support services offered to students, and students' experiences with cultural centers (e.g., Patton, 2006a; Hypolite, 2020a; Hypolite, 2022). Black cultural centers provide resources to support the academic, social, and cultural needs of Black domestic and international students. BCC staff are also a resource for Black faculty, staff, and community members (Patton, 2006a). The BCC programs and partnerships celebrate Black American and African diasporic

histories and cultures, supports student development, and encourages community building (Patton, 2010). BCCs helps students with daily needs such as offering computer labs, print services, technology rentals, and making physical space available for students to host meetings (Patton, 2006a). Patton (2006a, 2008) found students' participation in BCCs informed their involvement in other campus activities. Students reported participation in the BCC as a first-year student helped them sharpen their leadership skills which included public speaking, interpersonal skills, event planning and marketing, and teamwork (Patton, 2006a, 2008). In these studies, students were engaged with BCCs as student workers, ambassadors, and participants in mentorship programs. Students' self-assurance and confidence also grew after participating in BCC programs, and in turn this led to their involvement in mainstream campus activities such as student government and homecoming committees.

Similarly, multicultural center staff members design culturally relevant services, events, and initiatives to support students' success, academic achievement, professional and leadership development (Patton, 2006a). Multicultural centers generally focus on issues related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other areas (e.g., religion, physical health, mental health) (Williams & Clowney, 2007). Participation in MC programs helps students with development in areas such as racial understanding and awareness (Milem, 2003); "establishing mutual understanding, respect, and greater openness to differences" (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 6); and cultivating cross-cultural appreciation (Patton, 2006a). The MC staff does work that aims to promote and celebrate diverse cultures from various social identity groups. Multicultural and Black cultural center staff also organize DEI events (e.g., tabling events highlighting cultural student

organizations, host DEI workshops), advise student organizations (e.g., Asian American Student Association, Black Student Union), and coordinate diversity months/days (e.g., Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Pride Month, Transgender Day of Visibility) (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

In addition to structured programming, MCs and BCCs are resources and interactive learning spaces for campus communities which center the often-silenced voices of historically marginalized identities. These centers play a role in increasing the retention rates of underrepresented students and assisting with their transition to college life by fostering a sense of community and belonging and placing students' needs at the forefront of programmatic efforts (Patton, 2010; Hypolite, 2022). Cultural center staff are key players in "translating the needs of students between institutional structures and helping students access resources that might have otherwise been difficult to find and use" (Hypolite, 2020, p. 88; see Hypolite, 2020b; Museus & Neville, 2012). For example, a fraternity and sorority department, specifically Greek councils that are predominantly and historically white (e.g., Interfraternity Council, Panhellenic Council), may contact a cultural center to host an information session about their organizations to reach a diverse audience of potential new members. BCCs and MCs also serve as connectors to other identity-based centers, which is pertinent because of the increasing call to address students' intersectional identities (Harris & Patton, 2016; Hypolite, 2020b).

Additionally, extant literature focuses on the history and politics that led to the establishment of cultural centers (Hefner, 2002; Sanders, 2016; Patton, 2006a; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Princes, 2005; Shuford, 2011), the benefits of the centers on PWIs (Pittman, 1994; Patton, 2010; Young, 1991), and the experiences with cultural centers

from student perspectives (Patton, 2006a; Patton, 2010; Strayhorn et al., 2012; Hypolite, 2020; Hypolite, 2022). Black cultural centers and multicultural centers have been on college and university campuses for decades – over 50 years for BCCs – and their support of students' academic, social, and cultural needs and contributions to institutional DEI efforts have been explored, however, there is limited research about the experiences of the staff who work in the centers. Research that examines how cultural center staff make meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a practice and as their work in the context of PWIs and how institutions support these staff or create barriers is needed. Moreover, considering the passage of legislation that limits DEI initiatives and the dissolvement of DEI centers and offices across various states, there is a need for further exploration of cultural centers to illuminate how staff are addressing such changes and challenges. Next, I explore some current challenges cultural centers are facing.

Challenges Facing Cultural Centers

Cultural centers have a history of supporting the needs of underrepresented students, and over the years they have evolved to address the changing needs of the institution and students they serve. Some centers transitioned from identity-specific centers to multicultural centers, while others expanded their services to reach more constituents across their campuses (Princes, 1994; Patton & Harris, 2016). Although there are proponents who espouse the benefits of having these centers on campus, many centers are facing barriers that threaten their future. Cultural center leaders, for instance, are crucial cultural agents (Hypolite, 2020b) and decision-makers as they must determine how and to what extent their center's mission should change to meet the contemporary needs of students (Harris & Patton, 2016). In discussing a BCC, Hefner (2002) asserted

"the future of Black cultural centers depends heavily on the vision of their directors, the strength of their students and faculty, and the involvement of their surrounding communities" (p. 28). Cultural center staff are addressing challenges to their centers' relevance, validity, decreased budgets, and shifting institutional support under the backdrop of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation and a "colorblind approach to campus racial politics" (Harris & Patton, 2016, p. 345).

Relevance and Validity

In the 1980s and 1990s pressures mounted for identity-specific centers like the Black cultural center to expand their mission to account for students' intersectional identities and adopt a multicultural approach to support a diversifying student body (Sanders, 2016; Hypolite, 2020b). Then, later in 2008, the election of Barack Obama as the first president to racially identify as Black, appeared to be a sign to some that the US was becoming more tolerant, sensitive, and understanding of race relations and that we were entering a postracial society (Baber, 2015). As such, the mission of MCs and BCCs, particularly the race and ethnicity specific elements, started to pose a challenge to the relevance and validity of such centers in a postracial context where "race and culture are becoming less relevant" (Harris & Patton, 2016, p. 335). In their study, Harris and Patton found BCC directors encountered two systemic challenges to their work: postracial ideology and lack of funding.

Black cultural center leaders explained that both students and staff "believed that race and racism were no longer relevant to American society, and subsequently to higher education" (Harris & Patton, p. 340). One participant shared that Black and white students questioned how a place like the BCC could "help them;" while another

discussed how Black students in the twenty-first century "don't see a reason to think about being Black" (Harris & Patton, 2016, p. 340). Conversely to Harris and Patton's findings associated with postracial ideology, there is a tension between how some Students and Staff of Color perceive cultural centers today and how they are activated on predominantly white campuses during racially charged incidents. For instance, when racialized incidents occur on a predominantly white campus, cultural centers and their staff are contacted to support students in distress, provide educational information to the campus community, and lead diversity trainings among other efforts (Briscoe, 2022b). Moreover, the creation of BCCs and MCs were to generally address issues (e.g., racism, discrimination, isolation, exclusion, hostile campus environments) facing underrepresented student populations and extant research supports that these centers have been holding true to that mission. However, questions regarding the validity and relevance of cultural centers in today's twenty-first century racial context are challenging the centers' race-conscious missions (and related efforts) and positing that the centers are excluding white students at PWIs.

Additionally, the lack of funding for cultural centers is a barrier. Underfunding adversely impacts staffing, programming, and additional support services (Harris & Patton, 2016). Cultural centers offer inclusive programs, yet their focus is perceived as niche, singular, and only for specific identities. Patton and colleagues (2019) noted that:

> Although most postsecondary institutions espouse a commitment to diversity and inclusion in their mission and vision statements, when making tough financial decisions, key diversity efforts are often cut or minimized; suggesting a clear contradiction between institutional claims and institutional actions (p. 178).

When funding is on the line, cultural center staff are often charged with justifying their centers' existence (Bankole, 2005) and managing an ever declining budget while institutions tout their commitments to DEI. The underfunding of BCCs, for example, can also lead to an inability to organize programs for Black students and the campus at-large because of limited "personnel power" (i.e., staffing) (Harris & Patton, 2016, p. 341).

The issues of postracial ideologies and lack of funding are connected. Sentiments that race does not matter or is no longer an important social justice issue spans all facets of US society, including college and university campuses, thereby "instilling the understanding that race has ceased to exist" and naming cultural centers as no longer relevant (Harris & Patton, 2016, p. 341). Postracial discourse shapes funding allocation for centers. Renn (2011) noted that in a postracial society, cultural centers are perceived as entities that are not in alignment with the mission of the university, while Patton (2011) posited that identity centers are often the first to see budget reductions and cuts. So, institutions' budget lines for DEI work tells a story about just how much they value and are committed to DEI in practice and in action.

Concerns of Separatism

Questions of who, how, where, and to what extent cultural centers should serve identity groups on campus have been looming over these centers for decades (Young, 2005; Hefner, 2002; Princes, 1994). As the landscape of higher education institutions changes, so too, must the services and resources available to students. Patton (2011; 2006a) detailed a popular misconception of cultural centers is that they foster separatism and isolation of marginalized student populations. Critics believe cultural centers impede cross-cultural interactions and hinders Student of Color from fully integrating into the

campus community (Sanders, 2016). A common remedy to address concerns of separatism is to merge identity-specific centers, particularly race and ethnicity-specific centers (e.g., BCC) into multicultural centers or remove cultural centers from campus completely (Hypolite, 2020a). Champions of these mergers call for cultural centers to serve a wider array of student populations to quell financial constraints associated with operating a myriad of centers and to better align with the university missions (Patton et al., 2019; Sanders, 2016; Stewart & Bridges, 2011). Stewart (2005) offered additional challenges to identity-specific cultural centers including pressures from popular culture (i.e., societal shifts in the perception of and need for cultural centers), prioritization of multiculturalism, and changes in higher education institutions (e.g., modern technology, campus demographics, institutional culture). Critics also claim cultural centers use political indoctrination, instead of cross-cultural appreciation to influence students' perspectives (Sanders, 2016).

In defense of cultural centers and challenges against the separatism argument, Pittman (1994) postulated:

> Charges of separatism and reverse racism discrimination are hurled at students of color who, on most campuses, are numerically unable to pose the kind of 'threat' that some critics seem to believe is imminent. The academic and residential life of these students requires them to negotiate and survive in white or 'integrated' settings most of the time. The time spent in a culture center, by comparison, is hardly significant enough to warrant such charges. Contrary to prevailing perceptions, some research has shown that students of color tend to socialize outside of their racial and ethnic groups more than white students. (p. 104).

Proponents of cultural centers assert that the centers foster a sense of community, mattering, self-preservation, and greater understanding of difference and diversity irrespective of racial identity (Patton, 2006a). Supporters also note cultural centers, specifically multicultural centers, offer opportunities for white students to engage in cross-cultural interactions, the deconstruction of whiteness and racial superiority, and provides space for white students to think about their own and others' racial and ethnic identities (Benitez, 2010). However, there are challenges to these sentiments. Patton (2006a) argued a "one size fits all approach" challenges the relevancy of identity-specific centers (i.e., Black cultural centers). Champions of identity-specific centers contend that they strengthen students' sense of belonging, are a "home away from home," and bolster students' sense of identity (i.e., racial, ethnic, cultural) (Patton, 2006a), and that they foster connection and community for minoritized groups (Hypolite, 2022, p. 94; see Foxx, 2021).

Moreover, the challenges against cultural centers comes in the midst of national discourse about diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education (and other fields) and the reversal of race-conscious (affirmative action) college admissions. Questions have also been raised about just *who* benefits from DEI initiatives. In light of this, many states have introduced or passed legislation aimed at defunding or banning DEI initiatives. The research discussed previously highlights the historical overview of DEI in higher education, cultural centers, and student affairs professionals' experiences at PWIs – with an emphasis on staff experiences with DEI work – the focus of this study. At the core, DEI initiatives were introduced to college and university campuses to address issues such as diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and social justice. In the following section, I

present anti-DEI legislation that is impacting higher education and highlight the role this legislation played in undergirding the selection of the theoretical framework: critical race theory and data collection for this study.

Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies in Higher Education

Higher education institutions across the United States have built robust diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across many decades. DEI efforts take shape via centers, departments, offices, programs, courses, workshops, training, divisions, among other initiatives. Initially established to address and mitigate issues in higher education (e.g., historical legacy of exclusion, discrimination, racist practices), DEI initiatives are garnering questions regarding their relevance, inclusivity, and purpose in a society and on campuses that are "postracial and diverse." Today, some colleges and universities are being asked to rethink or dissolve these efforts. Richard Baker, JD, PhD, executive director for institutional equity and equal employment opportunity and the Title IX coordinator at Rice University explained DEI as "a collection of perspectives, experiences, and issues facing all citizens;" he added that "to limit access to the information that strengthens us is troubling for a government to do" (Cliburn, 2023, para. 3). Baker further argued that political actions against DEI tend to be ambiguous and omit whether it is the "term 'DEI' or the function of a DEI program or office that is objectionable" (Cliburn, 2023, para. 4). Proponents of DEI efforts, such as cultural centers, also assert that these initiatives help foster a sense of belonging (Foxx, 2021), build inclusive environments (Patton, 2006a; Hypolite, 2020a; McShay, 2017), and increase student retention and succuss (Hypolite, 2022), which aligned with Baker's definition. Laura Lanese, president and chief executive officer of the Inter-University

Council of Ohio – an educational association of Ohio's public universities – stated in an open letter that "DEI is for students with disabilities, veterans with PTSD, minority students, and students who are New Americans who may need extra help due to language or cultural barriers" (Inter-University Council of Ohio Letter, 2023, para. 17).

Conversely, critics of DEI efforts assert they are "divisive, push 'woke' ideologies on staff and students, and are a waste of taxpayers' money" (Wood, 2023, para. 4). Detractors are concerned that DEI efforts hinder academic freedom, restrict viewpoint diversity, and further marginalize minoritized students, staff, and faculty (Cliburn, 2023). Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida blamed "liberal extremism" for limiting viewpoint diversity and free thought (Cineas, 2023; Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 2023). For example, one of the anti-DEI bills in Texas states that it will "put an end to all activities that discriminate against students based on their race, ethnicity, or gender" (Wood, 2023, para. 5). As of April 2024, eighty-two anti-DEI bills aimed at restricting DEI efforts within public HEIs have been introduced across 28 state legislatures and the US Congress; twelve bills have been signed into law (Lu et al. 2023). Indiana, North Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, Texas, Idaho, Tennessee, Florida, North Carolina, and Alabama have passed anti-DEI laws. These bills prohibit diversity efforts in teaching and instruction, hiring and promotion practices, scholarships, college access and choice, mandatory diversity training, diversity statements, and the use of state appropriations to fund DEI offices or staff at public colleges and universities as well as related bills aimed at limiting discussions of race and gender in classrooms (Wood, 2023; Lu et al., 2023).

A Snapshot of Anti-DEI Bills

There are numerous legislative moves to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts across the United States (see Appendix A for a list of anti-DEI bill information by state). Florida is one clear example of anti-DEI movements in higher education. In Florida, under House Bill 999 and its companion Senate Bill 266 public higher education institutions are prohibited from using state and federal appropriations on the promotion, support, or maintenance of DEI programs. The bills also prohibit institutions from offering general education courses that "teach identity politics, or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in institutions of the United States" (Bryant & Appleby, 2023, para. 11). House Bill 931 and its companion Senate Bill 958 prohibit public institutions from giving preferential consideration for employment, admission, or promotion to individuals who "show support for any ideology or movement that promotes the differential treatment of a person or a group of persons based on race or ethnicity, including an initiative or a formulation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Bryant & Appleby, 2023, para. 13). Put another way, Florida's public HEIs cannot use identity-based preferences in hiring or admissions nor use "political litmus tests" (e.g., diversity statements that speak to a prospective student or employee's experiences with inclusive environments).

Other states have similar bills. For example, House Bill 607 in North Carolina restricts the NC system and public community colleges from asking prospective employees and students about their political or social beliefs (i.e., bans on diversity statements) (Bryant & Appleby, 2023). In North Dakota students, faculty, and other HEI employees cannot be asked about their political or ideological viewpoints and public

institutions cannot conduct diversity training, with limitations on how racism and sexism can be discussed under Senate Bill 2247. In Tennessee, Senate Bill 102 and House Bill 158 prohibits mandatory implicit bias training for faculty and other employees on higher education campuses. Bryan and Appleby (2023) detailed that in Texas beginning on January 1, 2024 DEI offices, diversity training for students and employees, and "ideological oaths and statements" at public HEIs will be banned (para. 50).

Moreover, the push to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education will impact staff who work in spaces and students who engage with these programs. Specifically, for this study the focus of this study was on anti-DEI legislation that limited funding for DEI initiatives, offices, and staff. Historically, DEI initiatives were created to succor the needs of groups who were previously excluded and discriminated against. As the needs of these groups grew and compositional diversity expanded, colleges and universities sought better ways to support them. Broadening the services and resources that were designed for marginalized groups to include students in the racial majority at PWIs coupled with concerns of "exclusionary" DEI initiatives highlights the further marginalization of Students of Color in an effort to maintain hierarchical systems wherein white interests are preserved (Abrica & Oliver, 2024).

Chapter Summary

I began this chapter with an overview of my theoretical framework – critical race theory – and emphasized the CRT tenet of counternarrative. I used the CRT tenets of the permanence of racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, and interest convergence to critique the literature. Then, I presented a historical overview of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education, contextualized DEI as concepts and practices

(i.e., work), and provided the history and current operations of cultural centers. The experiences of student affairs professionals who do DEI work was also reviewed to provide an understanding of why a study of cultural center staff specifically is needed. Lastly, I offered some challenges facing cultural centers with a focus on anti-DEI legislation impacting higher education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study examined the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion staff in cultural centers at predominately white institutions. I focused on how their experiences as DEI practitioners informed how they make meaning of what DEI is and how they would address proposed (or passed) anti-DEI legislation that limited or ceased funding for DEI efforts. This study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff members within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?
2. How do these experiences shape staff members' DEI identity and work?
3. How does the current political environment, including anti-DEI policies across the United States inform, if at all, the work of DEI staff within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?

In this chapter I offer the study's research design and methodology. The first section is my positionality statement which details how my experiences shaped the research design and process. Then, I detail the research methods: narrative inquiry and critical race methodology. Next, I cover trustworthiness strategies, study limitations, and conclude with a chapter summary.

Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher acknowledges their positionality by interrogating their biases, beliefs, stances, and perspectives (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Exploring the researcher's position, influences, and construction of meanings during the research process is pertinent for researchers to do. Examining past experiences and how these experiences shape the construction of knowledge is also necessary for

researchers to engage in reflexivity. I offer my positionalities and the ways my identities, experiences, and perspectives have informed my interest and approach to the present study.

In late September 2020, when I was working as a coordinator in a multicultural affairs office at a public, four-year, predominantly white research institution, then President Donald Trump signed an executive order banning certain diversity training on racial and gender biases within the federal government, its contractors, subcontractors, and grantees (Fuchs, 2020). The impact of the executive order cascaded throughout higher education institutions, the government, and corporate businesses. The head of my division contacted me to change language on the division's website associated with the then-mandatory diversity training for first-year students. My colleagues and I in the multicultural affairs office were required to change language in our diversity workshops as well. Though the workshops covered a variety of topics and were often tailored to meet the requests of the offices and organizations that requested the workshops, we had to ensure our presentations did not cover specific concepts such as white privilege and anti-racism. It was during this time I realized the staff at the helm of the daily operations of DEI offices, centers, and initiatives did not have the liberty to discuss or coordinate programs that covered a myriad of diversity issues that would disrupt the status quo.

That fall semester I had a revelation: my experiences with DEI work heavily centered on students' perspectives and experiences; however, I neglected the staff and in turn myself as a critical part of the motifs and composition of the DEI tapestry. A year later during the first semester of my doctoral program, I decided to intentionally engage with research that focused on cultural center staff and completed course assignments

around this topic. I was specifically interested in learning more about the experiences of cultural center staff who worked in environments that were constantly under attack, with claims that such offices are no longer relevant and necessary student support services (Harris & Patton, 2016). Importantly, in May 2023, Florida became the first state in the United States to pass a bill restricting certain majors and banning federal and state appropriations from used for DEI programs at public institutions of higher education. The ban restricts DEI offices and staff, diversity statements, and identity-based preferences for hiring and admissions (Lu et al., 2023). In 2024, nine other states have signed bills into law that limit DEI efforts in higher education.

As a former full-time DEI professional, with aspirations to reemerge in this space upon completing my doctoral program, the bills and introduction of bills to limit or ban DEI initiatives – especially ones that aim to restrict funding to DEI programs, offices, and staff – are particularly salient for me. My experiences as a student participant in DEI initiatives during my undergraduate studies and master's program, my professional role in a cultural center, and the current sociopolitical context in which DEI in higher education institutions is being framed underscored the development of this study. It is under this backdrop that I questioned just what is the dissolvement of diversity, equity, and inclusion roles and offices signaling to the people who work within and frequent these spaces. Having been on the inside of these spaces, doing the work, I have seen how people looking for a place to call their own respond and interact with it and the staff who work in these spaces. Here, I am not suggesting these spaces are above reproach; however, I am asking if these spaces and this work that is being attacked is indicative of *who* is perceived to belong in higher education.

I am a Black woman with educational experiences at three predominantly white institutions, first-generation student status, and I am a self-identified DEI practitioner. I am also a Christian. I grew up COGIC (Church of God in Christ) and now identify with the nondenominal Christian denomination. My salient identities did cross paths with some of my study participants, particularly my Black womanhood and Christian faith. As such, my personal, educational, and professional experiences in DEI spaces allowed me to recognize and challenge the experiences of DEI practitioners in the context of higher education cultural centers. Sharing some identities or experiences with the participants allowed me to be an open and empathic co-participant and researcher. These identities also shaped how I interpreted the participants' stories shared in their lived experiences. I also used analytic memos to reflect on the participants' experiences and how I related them to my own experiences in cultural centers. This helped me not only be introspective but also it helped me open to the meaning-making process even when I was engaging with material that made me sad or upset, for example.

What is more, I operated under the assumption that the DEI staff in cultural centers were there to cultivate spaces and cultures that were caring, safe, welcoming, and inclusive to those who engaged with the centers. Interestingly, these spaces often overlook the needs of the staff, rendering their experiences inconsequential to the students who utilize their services. The DEI staff are imperative to cultural centers and provide services well beyond the scope of their office to students serving as academic advisors, confidants, mentors, advocates, and advisors (Townsend, 2021). Thus, cultural center staff were uniquely positioned as individuals who work in DEI spaces and as members of other marginalized identities (e.g., minoritized racial or ethnic groups, queer

folk, gender diverse people) to share their stories that informed how they responded or would respond to anti-DEI efforts.

I acknowledge my experiences, professional goals, and social identities have influenced my assumptions of DEI initiatives; hence I recognize the potential for my experiences and identities to inform how I engaged and interpreted the stories put forth by the participants. However, as my experiences with cultural centers evolved from a student who engaged with cultural center programs to a graduate assistant who organized and coordinated programs to a full-time employee of a cultural center who advised student organizations and advanced a center's mission – I believed my experiences connected me to cultural centers in such a way that I could speak to and research cultural centers. I have seen how cultural centers can positively shape the experiences of Students of Color and Professionals of Color on predominately white campuses and I have bare witnessed to some of the challenges centers faced in the current sociopolitical climate. It is my hope that the present study amplified the voices of DEI staff members whose stories often go untold.

Research Design

Narrative inquiry and critical race theory, which were discussed in chapter two, undergirded the research design of this study. Together, a narrative approach and the theoretical framework of critical race theory captured the lived experiences of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Inspired by Leonardo's (2013) presentation of *race as narrative,* the key idea of this research was narrating the experiences of underrepresented, minoritized voices of cultural center staff. As such, by conceiving social life and hence, social identities in narrative form, storytelling is a "mechanism that

binds our understanding of social phenomena" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 20). Moreover, critical race theory uses counternarratives or counterstorytelling to reframe the story and center discussions from the lived experiences of those whose voices are most affected by social inequities that are sustained by social constructions of social identities (e.g., race, sexuality, gender) (Leonardo, 2013). The methodological approach, theoretical framework, analytic framework, and methods that were chosen for this study helped situate the narratives of cultural center staff in such a way that their own stories were amplified to speak back to majoritarian narratives about the work they do in the centers.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology from the humanities wherein researchers study the lives of individuals. Narratives are used to study the stories of people's experiences (Reissmann, 2008). As a form of storytelling, narrative inquiry required me to analyze people's lived experiences and understand the context in which the experiences happened. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited that:

> Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving, and retelling, the stories of the experience that make up people's lives, both individual and social (p. 20).

I used narrative inquiry because I had an interest in deeply exploring the holistic depth and breadth of the cultural center staff members' experiences (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). The inquiry process began with me creating interview questions that evoked

storytelling (Kim, 2016). In using this methodology, I had to listen closely and "restory" participants' narratives to confirm understanding and asked questions to elucidate the story, in doing so, the I learned what the participant knew about the inquiry of interest (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016, p. 15). Restorying was the process of reorganizing and analyzing the key elements of a story and rewriting it within a chronological order (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This process also required that I place the stories in theory; generate and analyze data; and develop stories that captured the attention of the audience and remained steadfast in (re)presenting stories that amplified and honored the participants' voices (Kim, 2016). This methodology was a means of exploring individuals' identities, how these identities shaped their experiences, and emphasized the multifaceted meanings people drew from their lived experiences.

Moreover, in narrative, there is a three-dimensional space or the commonplaces of narrative inquiry in which experiences are told through stories that are situated across these dimensions. Experience occurs in specific places, at a specific point in time, and in relation to oneself or others. Thus, I had to consider the experience in four directions: inwards, outwards, forwards, and backwards (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). As such, all experiences informed successive experiences.

Narrative inquiry also provided me with an opportunity to better understand specific environments or a period in time (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, collaboration between me and the participants was important from the start of the project through the interpretation and restorying phases (Clandinin, 2007). The participants and I worked together to make meaning of the stories shared via member checks during the duration of the data collection and analysis processes, and in this way, I became a co-

participant. Listening, observing, and living alongside participants allowed me to immerse myself deeper into the research phenomenon (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). As the stories were lived, told, collected, and retold I sought active collaboration with the participants throughout the narrative inquiry process. I also had to engage in continual discussions about the stories with the participants and reflected on my own subjectivities and my social, political, and personal background, which shaped how I re-storied the narratives (Wang & Geale, 2015).

The researcher-participant is a dynamic, complex, and sensitive part of the inquiry process; therefore, I employed an ethic of care to cultivate a safe, open, honest, reflective environment for storytelling and the revelation of participants' subjective truths within their social contexts (Wang & Geale, 2015). For diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals employed at cultural centers in higher education institutions in the United States, contemporary narratives about the centers called into question their validity, purpose, and necessity in a "postracial society" where race is becoming less relevant (Bankole, 2005; Stewart, 2005). The use of narrative inquiry had the ability to challenge such power structures.

Critical Race Methodology

In an effort to better understand critical race methodology, one must revisit its theoretical foundation: critical race theory. Critical race theory was a useful theoretical and analytic lens to situate this research study as it illuminated the normalized and perpetual racist social structures that inform higher education policy and construct barriers, limitations, and restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion staff and initiatives. Notably, critical race theory in education "unmasks" nonracial phenomena as

racial in nature (Leonardo, 2013, p. 19). In the context of this study, the racial history of the establishment of cultural centers cannot be divorced from the contemporary legislative action against initiatives for Communities of Color and other minoritized groups. James (2012) contended CRT "provides a lens through which we can examine how race and racism operate on a number of levels in society – individually, institutionally, and structurally – in shaping the life experiences and well-being of racial minorities" (p. 22).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) posited that critical race methodology generates knowledge by "looking to those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered" (p. 36). In every stage of the research process (e.g., the development of research questions; collecting, analyzing, and presentation of data), I centered underrepresented voices. A critical race methodology challenged assertations of "neutral" or "objective" research and acknowledged the intercentricity of oppression – the intersectionality of subordination based on minoritized identities (e.g., race, class, gender, immigration status, surname, sexuality) (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25).

As discussed in chapter two, the tenets of CRT underscored the multiple and interrelated elements of US society that perpetuates racial discrimination and inequality. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) suggested critical race methodology centers the voice of Communities of Color and challenges deficit thinking while suggesting solutions for liberation from racial subordination. In this light, all participants in this study did come from a racialized Community of Color. Moreover, the space they take up as DEI professionals in cultural centers positioned them in such a way that the work they do and students they serve "exist in the margins due to their racialization, lack of representation,

and ongoing, pervasive [experiences of] racism in the US” (Squire, 2020). Therefore, critical race methodologies was a good fit to ground this study.

Additionally, for the scope of this study, the strength of using the CRT tenet of counternarrative as a theoretical and analytic framework was that it helped explain the experiences of DEI professionals in cultural centers as they navigated the potential threat of their centers being restructured, the flattening of their work, and/or the dissipation of their centers. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) defined counternarratives as “naming one’s own reality” or “voice” via “parables, chronicles, stories, counterstories, fiction” (p. 56). In understanding how majoritarian narratives – dominate stories of “truths,” “standards,” and what is “normal” as told by the majority and meant to subjugate minoritized groups (Capper, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) – inform DEI work on higher education institution campuses, generating counternarratives of cultural center staff members’ experiences helped to amplify their voices and affirm that DEI efforts such as cultural centers are needed on college and university campuses. In this study, the use of critical race methodology and the use of interviews and counternarrative as an analytic tool were also crucial in grounding the study in a way that the participants’ voices were central to stories being (re)presented (Squire, 2020).

Research Methods

Framed and informed by the concepts and theories of narrative inquiry and critical race methodology, this study examined the experiences of DEI professionals who held at least one marginalized identity and who had experience working in cultural centers at predominately white institutions in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States. The following section describes the study’s sample selection process, participants

data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. I conclude with study limitations and a chapter summary.

Recruitment Site Context

The recruitment of study participants started with institutions with which I had a personal connection. I recruited participants from large, four-year, predominately white institutions that were situated in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the US. The Carnegie Classification details large institutions as those with at least 10,000 degree seeking students (Size & Setting Classification, 2023). Each institution grants bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, with some granting professional degrees. These institutions also had one or more dedicated cultural centers with full-time staff dedicated to organizing and facilitating DEI programs.

In addition to my personal connections to some of these institutions, the geographical location of them is noteworthy. The Southern and Midwestern regions of the US have introduced or passed more anti-DEI bills in relation to other regions (Bryant & Appleby, 2024; Lu et al., 2023). As such, the sociopolitical context of these states and anti-DEI policies cannot be understood in isolation. I do not exclaim that all persons in a given context are monolithic and have the same political leanings or ideologies; however, I am reiterating that anti-DEI legislation *is* political.

Furthermore, in recruiting potential participants I approached them with care for them as DEI professionals and with a shared love for cultural centers and DEI work at the forefront. I was conscious of how this political climate, where diversity, equity, and inclusion was being challenged, required sensitivity to the threats they faced as DEI professionals. I reiterated to recruited parties that their identities would be protected; they

would have full anonymity in my presentation of study findings; they had the ability to suspend or cancel participation at any time during the study; and they had the ability to decline answering any question(s). This was paramount to ensure I cultivated a space where participants felt cared for, safe, seen, and heard.

Sample Selection

After receiving Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, I employed the concept of purposive sampling (Kelly, 2010; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Purposive sampling is "used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" (Kelly, 2010, p. 317) and is a way of identifying and selecting cases that will increase the depth of understanding. I contacted cultural center staff in my network who met the following: (a) I knew had at least one year of experience working in a cultural center, (b) I had a professional rapport with in advance of the study, and (c) I believed could provide insight into the daily operations of a cultural center and any changes to this work in response to anti-DEI legislation. I contacted potential participants by sending them an invitation to participate via text (see Appendix B) and then sent a follow-up email with more details (see Appendix C) if they expressed interest in my study. The follow-up email also contained the demographic/eligibility questionnaire (see Appendix D) . After the potential participants completed the questionnaire, I confirmed their eligibility, and they confirmed their willingness to participate in my study, I had one participant confirmed.

After my initial outreach with my personal network, I expanded the call to participate in my study to a broader network of Professionals of Color with whom I am in community with via a group messaging app that consists of over 1,000 higher education

and student affairs (HESA) professionals (see Appendix E for recruitment flyer). The group of HESA professionals also exposed my study to a wider audience who could have shared the information about my study with their networks outside of the group.

The outreach in the HESA group yielded potential participants. I privately messaged the individuals who “liked” my message and asked if they wanted to learn more about my study. The individuals who expressed interest in my study shared their email addresses with me and I emailed them the recruitment email. This process resulted in two additional participants, which brought the total number of participants to three. In narrative inquiry, sample sizes are small to allow the researcher the ability to maintain focus and build emphatic relationships with the participants (Staller, 2021). Importantly, full-time staff within cultural centers are also generally small. The number of eligible staff at the sites of interest – predominantly white, four-year, universities in the Midwest and South – is also small, typically around one to six full-time staff depending upon the university.

Participants

The population of interest for this study was full-time cultural center staff members at four-year, predominantly white institutions in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States. Participants met the following criteria:

- identify as a DEI professional
- employment in a Black cultural center or multicultural center at a predominately white institution
- have a minimum of two years’ experience working in a cultural center

- identify with one or more underrepresented identity such as racialized groups, minoritized ethnic groups, sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual), disability (such as those that affect a person's mental health, hearing, learning, movement, etc.), gender identity (e.g., trans, woman, womxn), etc.

This study consisted of three DEI practitioners who met the criteria. Notably, one participant, Dr. Monique, was employed at a cultural center at the time of recruitment, however, once we began our interviews she transitioned away from her role. However, because her experience in the center was recent, I believed she was still a good candidate for this study. An overview of the participants is available in detail in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym	Job Title	Years in Center	Center Type	Institution Type
Zahir	Director	8 months	Black	Public university
Dr. Monique	Specialist	3	Diversity and inclusion	Private research university
Erik	Director	1	Multicultural	Public research university

Moreover, this study explored the experiences of DEI staff who worked in DEI designated spaces during a time in which legislation was being passed to limit or ban DEI efforts, for example, some policies eliminated access to state and institutional funding for such efforts. Therefore, DEI staff who worked in cultural centers were well positioned to share their experiences, as opposed to DEI staff in other units on a university campus such as those within academic affairs.

Pseudonyms

Each participant was given the opportunity to determine pseudonyms for themselves and their institutions to establish anonymity in the presentation of findings. Participant one did not choose his pseudonyms. I elected to call him Zahir and his institution X University. With regard to Black names, Towe (2023) explained that "Black names can be unique and come from different backgrounds and origins worldwide. They hold significant importance in the way Black people view themselves, presently and historically" (para. 1). The name Zahir is of Arabic origin and means "helper, supporter, manifest" (Towe, 2023, para. 50). During our conversations, Zahir continually discussed how he wanted to help students, therefore, I believed that Zahir would be a fitting pseudonym. I selected X University as the pseudonym for his current institution because the letter "x" has diverse meanings, one of which is to represent the unknown. As a fairly new employee to X University, Zahir's legacy at the university is unknown and still being written.

Participant two, Dr. Monique, chose her name and the pseudonym for her institution, Flash U. Erik, participant three, also chose his name and the pseudonym for his institution, Broadview State University. Additionally, to ensure the participants' stories were re(presented) in a manner in which they were comfortable, and to ensure they had ownership of their stories, starting with their names and the names of their institutions, I asked them to provide their pseudonyms (Nasheeda et al., 2019). This request also helped maintain a collaborative environment between us.

Data Collection

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) via Microsoft Forms to determine if they met all the study criteria. Once confirmed, I sent each participant an informed consent (see Appendix F) form for review and a link to schedule the interviews. Participants engaged in three 60–180-minute semi-structured interviews (see Appendixes G, H, and I for interview protocols). Interviews, which are generally done in a narrative manner, were used to gather data and information and allowed me the opportunity to gain an in-depth and better understanding of the participants and their experiences. The semi-structured interviews allowed me greater flexibility in asking questions and for the participants to respond to questions in ways that were most comfortable for them. This type of interview style also allowed me to stray away from the preset interview protocol if participants' responses required additional probing or if more information about a sensitive issue was needed (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

In the first interview I focused on the participants' journey to becoming DEI professionals. At this time, I also began building rapport with the participants and learned about their educational, professional, and personal experiences that led them to becoming. Also, because each individual's DEI positioning and identity differed, having a deep discussion about their journey to their current position was critical. In the second interview I focused on how participants make meaning of DEI and their work in the cultural centers. I wanted to learn more about how the participants defined their work as DEI practitioners and understood the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this interview they also discussed their experiences with addressing changes in spaces that

have historically focused on marginalized identities – which were one of the types of DEI efforts challenged by legislative action across various states. During the final interview, participants were asked to detail their understanding of current anti-DEI efforts and other politically motivated challenges that informed the higher education environment.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing and the video/audio components were recorded via Zoom's recording feature. I downloaded the transcription provided by Zoom and then cleaned each transcript manually. Cleaning each transcription by hand was arduous, particularly because the artificial intelligence used to transcribe the audio did not do well at deciphering different types of regional dialect and intonation. However, having to clean the transcripts by hand helped me become intimately connected with the stories therein and I ended up engaging with the data in a way that I had not originally planned. This also helped me connect with the participants' stories on a deeper level during the data analysis. Additionally, the interviews were conducted virtually because this format allowed for greater flexibility of meeting location and offered some safeguards as it relates to ensuring participants' stories were told in their choice of environment, which in turn helped them feel safe enough to share their stories. Lastly, the data were stored on a personal password-protected laptop and folder to ensure participants' information and stories were maintained in a private space.

Data Analysis

In qualitative data analysis, the process is typically inductive and iterative. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) described the inductive process as "moving from small units of information to uncover the larger picture that emerges from them" (p. 435). As such, after a thorough interrogation of the data, researchers can identify themes or patterns based on

their interpretation and understanding of the data. This process was iterative or cyclical from the start of the study through its completion. In doing qualitative data analysis I immersed myself in the data and condensed the data into components that provided insight into my research questions (Butina, 2015).

Each participant had a folder on my laptop where I kept their raw and clean interview transcripts, analytic memos, codebooks, chronological plots, and final stories. I used analytic memos to allow myself space for reflection and to document emerging patterns across the data (Saldaña, 2009); this was the start of my initial coding process. At this time, I contextualized the data and identified salient concepts that would contribute to a codebook (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Each participant had a codebook that included emerging concepts from their narratives that informed the development of a chronological plot and ultimately their final story. In using the concepts from the initial coding, I was able to conduct a second cycle of coding: focused coding. I used my analytic memos, narrative blocks, and codes to identify emergent story elements (see Table 2 for story element examples).

Moreover, the critical race theory tenet of counternarratives, focused coding, and narrative analysis techniques guided the data analysis process. These methods worked in tandem which allowed me to develop labels and codes that become apparent from the data and re(presented) deeper understanding of the ways in which counternarratives and majoritarian narratives were expressed in the lives of the participants. My data analysis process was adapted from Nasheeda and colleague's (2019) multimethod restorying framework (Figure 1). My data analysis process included preliminary analysis, holistic-

content reading, initial coding, focused coding, collaboration, and the creation of the stories (Figure 2).

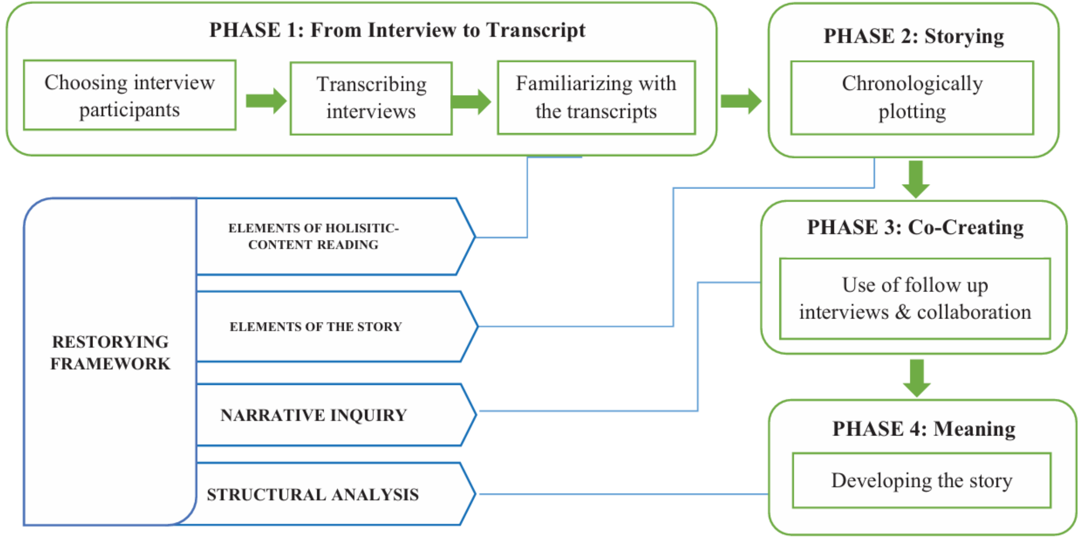

Figure 1. Nasheeda et al. (2019) Multimethod Restorying Framework.

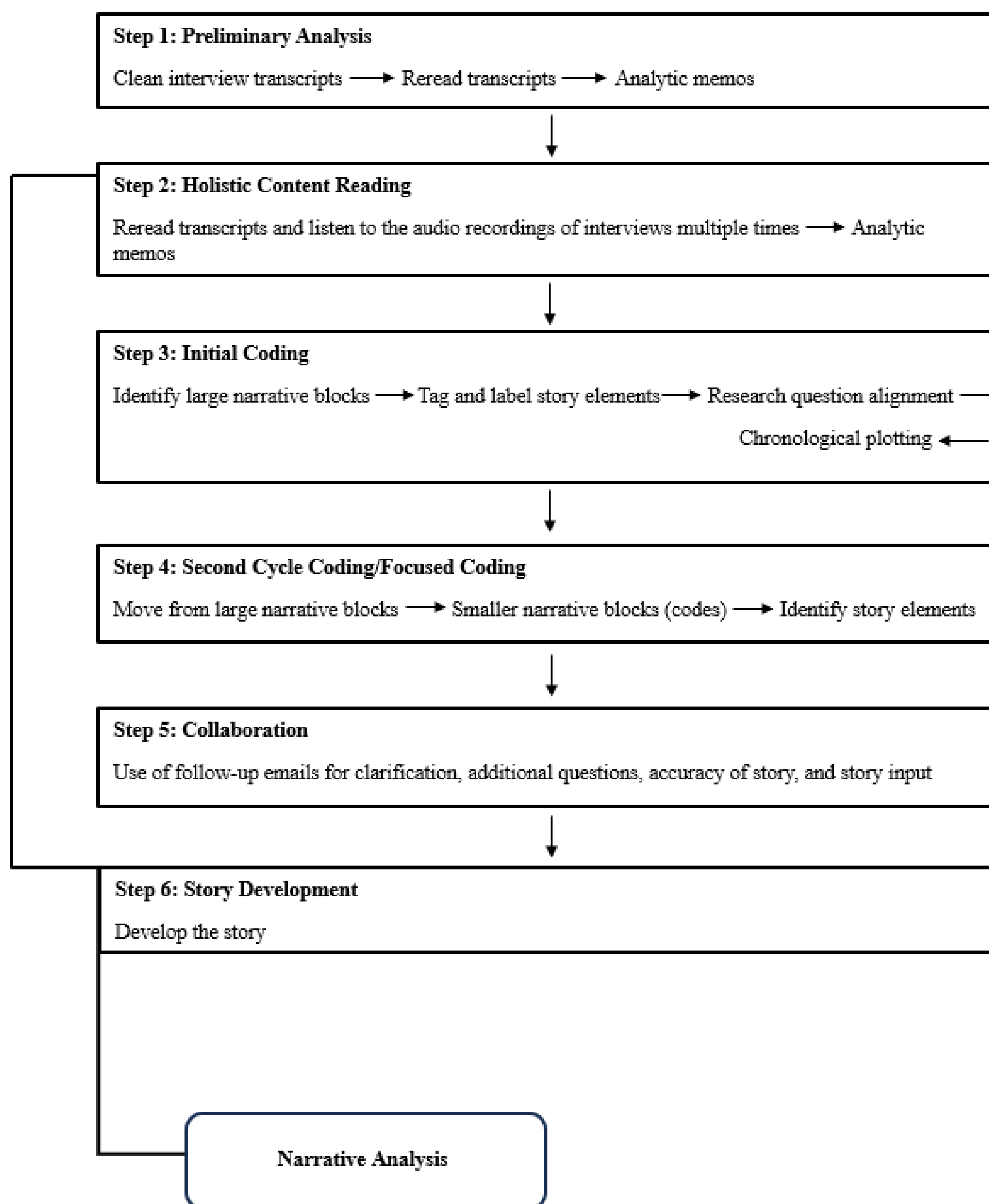

Figure 2. Adapted Multimethod Restorying Framework.

Step 1: Preliminary Analysis

I began my data analysis process with preliminary analysis following the second and third interviews during the data collection process. After each interview, I manually cleaned the automatic transcriptions provided by Zoom. During this time, I read the

transcripts and listened to the interviews to ensure the transcripts were accurate. Upon a second listen of the interviews, I wrote analytic memos – thoughts, questions, or ideas that come to my mind during data analysis. I wrote about my thoughts on participants' experiences within cultural centers and how this informed their work; my thoughts on their DEI career trajectory; connections I had with their stories; emotions I felt as I listened to the interviews; things I learned; connections to CRT; and questions or points of interest from each interview. I used the analytic memos as a time to reflect on the interviews and the research process overall. The memos also served as a time for me to document my assumptions about cultural center staff (e.g., why people choose to work in cultural centers). Below is an excerpt from an analytic memo from interview one with Erik where he discussed his thoughts on the election of the 45th president of the United States:

> *The election of 45 had on impact on Erik's life and his students' lives – this was evident by his reaction to the election results and the realization that there was nothing he could do to "quell the fears" of his students nor calm his own nerves. During this time, I was in a graduate program working on my master's degree. My institution held what was basically an open forum for students to talk about their concerns surrounding the recent election. It felt like the floodgates of bigotry were ushered in with 45's win. In Erik's example, it seemed as though the election of 45 ignited a fire in him; he was determined to be there for his students, especially students whose voices have been silenced and/or marginalized. This was especially inspiring as 45's rhetoric seemed to embolden people to speak and act in ways that pushed those in the lower rungs of society further into the*

margins. However, Erik said, in the words of Iyanla Vanzant 'NOT ON MY WATCH! NOT ON MY WATCH!' It was at this moment Erik realized he was called to do more in the DEI space; it had to go beyond programming. I wonder how DEI professionals in HESA are feeling right now? How can DEI professionals stand for the principles of DEI in the face of adversity and challenges to their work?

Step 2: Holistic Content Reading

In step two, during a second reading of the transcripts, I engaged in holistic-content reading to better familiarize myself with the transcripts (Nasheeda et al., 2019). This process included "reading the transcript and listening to the audio recording of the interview several times to immerse oneself in the data" (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 3). I also used this time to write more analytic memos with a focus on reflecting on the politicalness of the study design and contentiousness of the study topic. For example, during interview three with Zahir he shared how he discussed some of the challenges of being Black person on a predominantly white campus with his Black students. He told his students there were faculty who would "count them out because of the color of their skin." In context, he was discussing how he was teaching his students about how they should present themselves (e.g., how they dress). See Appendix J for an excerpt from this conversation. Below are some of my thoughts I had on his statements:

I felt Zahir's sentiments because I heard similar things when I was growing up. During our conversation, I connected (and still do) with what he said; however, this process allowed me to deeply think about my association with respectability politics and how this manifest(ed) in my life and how I project(ed) these politics

onto others. I unpacked a lot in my reflection but for brevity I was annoyed that Black students, Black people have to continually think about these types of things, while other groups do not. I thought about how much of a burden it is to have to think about how I present myself; how I talk; how my hair is styled; among so much other stuff. My annoyance turned into sadness as I thought about other Black DEI practitioners who experience the weight of respectability politics.

Step 3: Initial Coding

Next, I began step three: the coding process. I created copies of the cleaned transcripts and "tagged" and "labeled" each one. Rossman and Rallis (2012) described coding as the process of bracketing data by chunks and assigning a word or phrase that encompasses a category and labeling the category. I carefully read each transcript and identified large narrative blocks (i.e., chunks of research texts or data) that fell under a broad identifier (i.e., tag) such as background or upbringing. Then, I assigned a label to a specific section of the data chunk. Examples of labels I created are career, education, and life. At this stage, I drafted the participants' introduction. The introductions consisted of their career pathway to higher education and student affairs and the cultural center roles and information about their upbringing and education. The introductions are presented as the introduction and "pathway" sections in the participant's stories in chapter four. In creating the introduction as the first component of the participants' stories, I was able to build upon life events, career trajectories, and turning points that shaped or informed their experiences in the cultural centers and the development of their DEI identities.

Then, I copied chunks of data from the labeled narrative blocks into a document to outline meaningful segments as a step towards focused coding. I used the narrative

blocks to start sequencing the narratives – chronicling events through story elements (Knight, 2009). Story elements are aspects of a story such as characters, setting, conflict, actions, and resolutions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I used story elements instead of themes because story elements allowed me to maintain " a sense of the whole" – a holistic approach to restorying participants' lived experiences (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 3). In using this type of presentation, I was also able to restory participants' narratives as unique experiences without condensing their storied lives into uniform themes that would not have been representative of their individual experiences. Using story elements also helped me maintain a collaborative environment with the participants. In each participant's story I used different story elements, with the exception of the participant introductions I discussed previously. Examples of story elements include key characters and defining moments.

Table 2. Story Elements Example

Defining Moments	HESA Career Trajectory	Key Characters
Dr. Monique moved from an "unawareness" to an "awareness" of her DEI identity.	Zahir worked in a DEI office, residence life, student involvement, fraternity and sorority life, and he is now the director of a BCC.	Mothers
Erik experienced an "incredibly dark time" while working as a director	Erik worked in admissions; residence life, multicultural affairs, enrollment	Grandmothers

in residence life. By month six, he knew the job was not a good fit. He then determined he wanted to work more intentionally with marginalized student populations in his next role.	management, and he is now the director of a multicultural affairs office.	

Moreover, Nasheeda and colleges noted that sequencing narratives from transcripts is an important step in storytelling “as it reveals significant events, major turning points, and the voice of the storyteller” (p. 4). I then conducted initial coding wherein I used the research questions as tentpoles to map out each participant's story. For each participant I identified data chunks that fit under categories (e.g., career – mid-career; HESA successes; cultural center successes; cultural center challenges; turning points career) derived from the labels that were informed by the research questions. Then I reread the transcripts and listened to the audio to determine when events occurred. The data were then organized into events that were chronologically plotted (Nasheeda et al., 2019). I placed the events in order of occurrence in a separate document. To aid in the development of the chronological plot I considered the main characters, secondary characters, and turning points (Nasheed et al., 2019). During this time, I sat with the data, listened to the audio of the interviews again, and reread the transcripts. I also reread the chronological plots and ensured the data therein answered the research questions. These processes concluded steps one through three of my data analysis.

Step 4: Focused Coding

In step four I conducted focused coding. Miles and colleagues (2014) posited that focused coding stems from initial coding grouped summaries which are then sized down into more pointed categories. Focused coding helped me condense larger narrative chunks stemming from the labels into more specific codes. Here is where I condensed the larger labels into more concise codes to place narrative chunks into categories that represented emerging patterns, which became the story elements discussed in the previous section. Then I wrote a rough draft of the participants' stories. I shared the drafts with them to garner feedback and provide space for them to ask me questions about my data analysis process and how I crafted their stories. One participant did not provide feedback; one participant approved their story; and the third provided a correctional note for the content of one of their story elements and feedback on spelling and grammar.

Step 5: Collaboration

Step five consisted of follow-up questions and points of clarification with participants and collaboration. Although this process is presented as step five, active collaboration with participants was ongoing until the completion of the study. This step also required that I maintained participants' trust and retained a relationship with them throughout this study. The collaboration began with the sharing of cleaned interview transcripts, where participants confirmed that the information presented was accurate. At this time, participants were also asked to inform me of any information they preferred to exclude from the study findings. I also shared some excerpts from my analytic memos after drafting the stories with participants to highlight my thoughts and reflections during the data analysis process.

Step 6: Story Development

In step six I developed the participants stories. I worked to ensure my voice and biases did not overshadow the participants' voices in their stories. An example of how I centered the participants' voices was by asking follow-up questions to ensure I understood how the participants make meaning of life events, philosophies, and the language they used. Regarding language, I asked Dr. Monique to expand on her Band-Aid theory mentioned in the excerpt below:

> So, in my opinion, I think cultural centers are a Band-Aid to a problem. They're not actually resolving the problem.

Her follow-up response included detailed information and contemporary examples of how higher education institutions use Band-Aids in their enactment of policies. Language is a useful tool and was employed in various ways be the participants to describe their experiences (Nasheeda et al., 2019). During this step, I also determined if the emergent story elements from step four aligned with purpose of this study – to examine the experiences of cultural center staff at predominately white institutions – and the CRT tenets.

Narrative Analysis

I used narrative analysis throughout this process to better understand the narratives put forth by the participants. Kim (2016) explained narrative analysis occurs during data analysis and interpretation and helps researchers better understand the storied lives of the human experience. Each step of data analysis allowed me to process the data in a way that respected participants' *individual* and storied lives, without trying to find

commonalities or differences across their stories. I provide a discussion across the participants' similarities or differences in the discussion provided in chapter five.

During step two of the data analysis, holistic content reading and analytic memoing, was the first time I undertook narrative analysis. This step deepened my connection with the data as it occurred after I manually cleaned the transcripts line by line as discussed in the data collection section. Step three, the initial coding process, resulted in participant introductions and chronological plots. In creating both of these elements, I focused on overarching live events and noted I needed to go deeper to identity nuanced story phenomena, narrative events, narrative peaks, and narrative evaluations. Story phenomena are "stories within stories as the story moves through time and society" (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 4). Narrative events are specific parts about an event that the narrator wants to share (Köppe, 2014). Narrative peaks are points of interest in a story such as defining moments (Margetts, 2015). Narrative evaluations provide distinctive flares to stories that are particular to individuals (Nasheeda et al., 2019). These narrative elements in combination helped me (re)present their stories through their view which illustrated, for instance, the highs, lows, biases, and successes of their unique experiences (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

For example, in reflecting on the participants' events in the chronological plot, I realized their stories would not be able to be (re)presented in an ordered fashion for their narratives were full of color; thus, I had to color outside of the lines. As such the beginning, middle, and end of each participant's story varies. The participant introductions constituted the beginning for each story, but the elements therein are different. I learned background information about the participants across the first and

second interviews. In the first interview, an area of focus was general information about the participants and their career trajectories. In interview two, one of the questions I posed was "how do you identity?" This question was intentionally broad to provide space for the participants to share as much or as little information as they were comfortable disclosing. At times, some participants shared more information about their career trajectories and educational background, while others also shared information about their upbringing, family life, and religion. Additionally, some participants spoke longer about how their educational experiences informed their work in higher education and student affairs, while others spoke more about their overall HESA experiences that led to their roles in the cultural centers. Thus, the stories shared in the participant introductions are multifarious. Likewise, for the construction of the middle and end of the stories, I focused on research question alignment, the stories that (re)presented the participants authentically, and narrative peaks, events, and evaluations that painted a comprehensive picture of DEI practitioners during the anti-DEI movement. Furthermore, contextualizing the chronological plots and story elements were pertinent in the creation of story plots and ultimately the development of the stories that were representative of each participant's lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

In an effort to mitigate potential concerns of trustworthiness in qualitative research, researchers can deploy various strategies such as member checking, thick descriptions, triangulation, audit trail, and peer/external analysis. I used member checking, which required that I check in with participants to garner "feedback or verification of interpretation" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 477). I shared transcripts,

analytic memo excerpts, story elements, and draft stories with the participants to ensure my interpretations are in alignment with how the participants desire their stories to be (re)presented and retold. This was an important part that helped me build and maintain trust, rapport, and sustain an ethic of care with the participants and their stories.

I also included rich, thick descriptions. In qualitative research, thick descriptions help to convey meaning, and more specially in narrative inquiry, thick descriptions help make the narrative compelling, highlights the context, and explains the importance of interpretation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In this light, although I did not want to condense quotes from the participants, I ultimately chose to shorten some quotes for clarity, coherency, brevity, and research question alignment. My conversations with the participants were also a time of vulnerability, reflection, questioning, processing, and affirmation; therefore, there were stories that were shared between us that diverged from the research questions or elicited a memory that sparked another story that, if included, would not allow for the presentation of stories that were in alignment with my research questions.

In addition, I previously shared my positionality which is shaped by my experiences, background, philosophical paradigm, and biases, which informed my research process and the present study. As such, I employed reflexivity by using analytic and reflective memos. The reflective memoing after interviews detailed my thoughts on the research process and the analytic memos shaped how I created the labels, codes, categories, and story elements that helped me develop the stories (Willig, 2001). Taken together, member checking, thick descriptions, and reflexivity contributed to the trustworthiness of this study.

Study Considerations

This study included considerations that warrant acknowledgement. Notably, the overall qualitative research design offers researchers the opportunity to expand our understanding of nuanced and complex social phenomena that influences our lived experiences and meaning making processes (Austin & Sutton, 2014). As such, I provided the stories and perspectives of three participants engaged in DEI work within cultural centers at PWIs, which is not representative of DEI practitioners within student affairs and academic affairs in higher education. Nevertheless, in narrative inquiry, sample sizes are small to allow researchers to build rapport and empathic relationships with participants (Staller, 2021). Developing a space for empathy also helped in the storytelling and restorying processes and helped participants feel safe to share their stories with me. Next, a second consideration could be selection bias. In recruiting oen participant via my personal network of cultural center professionals, I may have unintentionally excluded potential participants from outside my network who may have had rich, deep stories to tell about their experiences within cultural centers.

The type of cultural centers that were chosen for this study could also be a consideration because, by design, it excluded other types of identity/cultural centers. While there are various types of centers, such as LGBTQIA+, Latine, Asian American, and Indigenous identity centers, they were not the focus of this study. My focus on Black cultural and multicultural centers – the two types of centers most accessible to me – is a consideration because the findings were restricted to staff members' experiences from those two distinct perspectives. Black cultural centers have a historical focus on Black American culture and cultures across the African diaspora, while multicultural centers

spread their focus across multiple social identities ranging from race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, religion, and other identities. Thus, there were limitations on what I learned about cultural center staff experiences. Relatedly, Zahir and Erik identified as Black men and Dr. Monique identified as a Black Caribbean American woman. I did not intentionally focus on any specific identities or intersecting identities during participant recruitment, however one criterion for participation was that participants had to identity with one or more marginalized identities. This could be considered a limitation as this study did not include the perspective of cultural center staff from other racial and/or ethnic groups or other intersectional identities of beyond race and gender such as sexuality, other types of gender identities, and ability. Another salient identity that may have provided additional perspectives is studying cultural center staff who had varying degrees of responsibilities such as assistant/associate director, coordinator, graduate assistants because all study participants held primary or main responsibilities for their centers.

In addition, to address additional concerns readers may have of narrative inquiries like this one, I have employed trustworthiness strategies, as described earlier (i.e., member checks, thick descriptions). These techniques helped with transferability – the extent to which study findings can be transferred to other context or settings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). While the findings within this study were not meant to serve as a representation of all cultural center staff members' experiences, they were meant to provide insight to advance future practice, theory, and research on cultural centers staff.

Finally, to help readers with transferability, this study has clearly defined the context of each participant, including their institution type (e.g., four-year public research

institution) and geographic location. The cultural center staff were employed at institutions in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States, therefore, how diversity, equity, and inclusion was understood and how DEI efforts manifested may differed geographically. This study has focused on large, four-year, predominate white institutions, whose contexts, access to resources, campus culture and climates, histories, and political and social environments differed from, for example, small, minority-serving, and two-year institutions.

Chapter Summary

The qualitative research method of narrative inquiry and the research methodologies were outlined in this chapter. In using narrative inquiry and critical race methodology, I was able to amplify the voices and center the lived experiences of DEI practitioners within cultural centers. I offered my positionality, which illuminated how my biases, experiences, and assumptions may have influenced how I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data. I also detailed ways in which I planned to mitigate issues around trustworthiness by using qualitative strategies that helped with dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I offer the findings for my study which were informed by situating three Black higher education and student affairs professionals' stories that answered the following research questions: (a) What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff members within cultural centers at predominately white institutions, (b) How do these experiences shape staff members' DEI identity and work, and (c) How does the current political environment, including anti-DEI policies across the United States inform, if at all, the work of DEI staff within cultural centers at predominately white institutions? I begin the presentation of stories with an introduction to HESA (higher education and student affairs) professionals Zahir, Dr. Monique, and Erik (pseudonyms) and then each story moves into varying story elements, as discussed in chapter three, that are specific to each participant.

The findings are informed by my pre-analysis and data analysis processes which occurred in concert with the participants' insight through feedback and collaboration. The findings represent iterative, collaborative, and reflective processes that shaped the story elements. The data were analyzed for story elements that were extracted from thick descriptions within the interview transcripts to develop each participants story through the restorying process, as discussed in chapter three.

Importantly, although each participant's story represents their individual experiences in HESA broadly and within cultural centers at predominantly white institutions, I presented their journeys into HESA in a similar fashion which served as the participant introductions and beginning of their stories, as detailed in chapter three. In this light, when I began sequencing the narratives I noted main or overarching story

elements because I used my research questions to ground my initial coding. The main elements across the stories are the participant introductions (i.e., educational background, career trajectory, upbringing), defining moments or transitions, consciousness of DEI identities, and meaning making processes associated with the participants' work, DEI principles, DEI legislation, and DEI work beyond the cultural centers. The main elements in Zahir's story include career and education trajectories, transitions, and lessons (participant introduction/beginning), defining moments and challenges (middle), and activation (counterstory/end). Dr. Monique's main story elements are career and education trajectories (participant introduction/beginning), lessons and challenges (middle), and defining moments (counterstory/end). The main elements of Erik's story include career and education trajectories and transitions (participant introduction/beginning), defining moments and challenges (/middle), and unshakable faith (counterstory/end). In each participant's story I label one section beginning, middle, and end. The story elements following the labeled story element fall under the preceding label.

In addition, although the participants' stories are not chronologically ordered, I present their stories in an ordered fashion. After developing the stories, I reflected on how they made me feel and how I interpreted our conversations. These words came to mind when I thought about their stories: purpose, determination, self-preservation, and hope. For me, Zahir's story represents purpose. He is the only participant who *actively* chose to work in a cultural center. He also shared throughout our conversations that he is community-minded. Also, developing and building community means *purpose* in Swahili. Thus, in considering his story in totality, I believed his story was a good fit to

begin the presentation of stories. Next, Dr. Monique's story represents *determination* and *self-preservation.* She shared how she used and will use diversity, equity, and inclusion principles in her work. She also explained how she defined herself by her own definitions and discussed how she would care for herself going forward while employing DEI principles within her work. Reflecting on her journey, I decided to place her story in the middle because of what it represents and could symbolize for other DEI practitioners. Finally, Erik's story represents hope. He shared how his faith guided his life and work throughout our conversations. What is more, hope and faith were a throughline across all our conversations. In considering his story overall, I determined to conclude the presentation of stories with *hope.* Hope for a future where diversity, equity, and inclusion are protected and sustained across higher education institutions.

Finally, some story elements across participants share a similar tone or voice in my restorying. This may have occurred because the experiences of HESA professionals – particularly the experiences of Black professionals who work with minoritized populations on predominantly white campuses – can be similar as they navigate challenges or triumphs in these spaces. In the following sections I present the participants' stories in a way that I hope encourages readers, especially DEI professionals in cultural centers, to process, reflect, and spark dialogue from their own experiences within HESA.

Zahir

Zahir is the product of a small town in the southern United States. Growing up he did not have strong connections with paternal figures in his life, but his mother and grandmother were tentpoles in his upbringing. The maternal figures in his life encouraged him to lead a life that was "better than" the lives they led. His mom often discussed ways he and his siblings could have a better life – entering the workforce, enlisting in the military, and going to college. He decided to go to college and enrolled at a public four-year institution in his hometown state. He declared engineering as his major – a career pathway he vaguely heard about while matriculating in secondary school. Although he did not know much about engineering, he believed that becoming an engineer would be a good path because it was one of the "big three" careers – doctor, lawyer, and engineer – he heard about as a youth. It was not until he got to the program that he realized engineering was "not for me." He ultimately changed majors and graduated with a bachelor's degree in business information systems in 2017.

As an undergraduate, Zahir was also actively involved in student organizations and campus life. He was involved in the gospel choir, Black men's initiative, a Black Greek letter fraternity, and served as peer mentor in the diversity office at his undergraduate institution. During his junior year he began to consider career options as he determined he did not want to work in business information systems – his major at the time. It was then that he learned about higher education and student affairs as a career pathway from his advisor in the diversity office.

Zahir went on to enroll in a graduate program at a public four-year institution in the southcentral region of the US. He received a master's degree in higher education

administration in 2020. Now, he is a 28-year-old doctoral student in a higher education administration program and director of a Black cultural center. Over the years, higher education attainment has been a major part of his life, and this is something he takes pride in as a Black, heterosexual, first-generation, cisgender male.

Intentional: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning

Embarking on a career in higher education and student affairs is not something Zahir thought he would be doing as a first-generation student when he started his first year of undergrad. After graduating with his bachelor's degree in the fall of 2017, he did a short stint at a loan company for seven months before he left for graduate school the following fall in 2018. While working on his master's degree, he knew he wanted to work in a diversity office – a space that had given so much to him and to whom he had given so much of himself at his undergraduate institution. He was ultimately hired as a graduate assistant in the diversity office at his graduate institution. He worked with a peer mentorship program, an early arrival program for minoritized Men of Color, advised student organizations, and coordinated programs for the office (e.g., MLK Jr. Day, homecoming events, special interest programs, cultural graduations).

As he prepared to graduate with his master's degree in the spring of 2020, his final semester was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Once he finished his program, he commenced his job search during the height of the pandemic. As such, roles within diversity, equity, and inclusion spaces were far and few in between.

> I always knew I wanted to work in DEI, just because of my undergraduate experiences. And so, I was very intentional when I was going to grad school, I was like, no, I want to work in a diversity office there. And so, having that

> experience at [my graduate institution], I really enjoyed that experience. Would have, after I graduated, worked in a diversity office, but it was during Covid and most of the jobs that were related to DEI was either postponed to a later date or they wasn't hiring because of funding at different institutions. As we know, DEI is the lowest funded on most campuses, and so they didn't have the funds to be able to hire another person or post a position and stuff like that.

Thus, he widened his job search and was eventually hired at a community college in the southeast. While there he had dual responsibilities in student leadership and residence life. He oversaw student organizations including student government in his capacity with student leadership. In residence life, he oversaw residence halls, supervised resident assistants, and assisted with the student conduct review process among other responsibilities.

> And so, that led me to accepting a job at [the community college] as the student services/area coordinator. [I] didn’t want to work in housing, but I was like – I will take the benefits of housing – not having to pay rent and stuff like that, but I still would have the opportunity to work with student orgs. And the institution itself was majority minority students. So, it was like 60% minority students. And so, it was still having the opportunity to work with them [minority students]. The faculty and staff didn’t reflect the student population. So, it was still times that I could use my DEI experiences to help the students navigate different things that they were encountering with faculty and staff, in our department. [I was] able to speak up and advocate for them to make sure they had the resources that they need to be successful... during their time at the university.

However, after a few months at the community college he realized the role and institution were not a good fit. Zahir started another job search, this time seeking opportunities that would allow him to work more directly with underrepresented populations. He transitioned away from the community college in January 2021 and began working at a public four-year institution in the southcentral region of the US as the inaugural coordinator for fraternity and sorority life with a concentration on culturally based organizations. In this role, he was "able to bring my experience within working in diversity, equity, and inclusion to advocate for MGC [Multicultural Greek Council] and NPHC [National Pan-Hellenic Council]." One of the goals he had in this position was to expose minoritized students to the culturally based sororities and fraternities available on campus.

> …On [that campus]… we had Black students that didn't know about NPHC. Hispanic/Latinx students that didn't know about MGC – or Native American, Asian American students – they didn't know about these organizations on campus. And so, they have the same barriers just because they in a Greek organization, that doesn't mean they don't encounter these same barriers.

However, after 2.5 years in that position, he was ready for another career move. The work in fraternity and sorority life allowed him to tangentially work with minoritized students because of the majority of students engaged with those organizations are minoritized. However, the Greek community, particularly the Greek community within the culturally based organizations is on that campus was a small, specialized community. He determined he wanted to work in a DEI *designated* space.

Activating the BCC at X University

After three years in HESA and working in areas he was not passionate about, Zahir is presently working in a DEI designated space in the Black cultural center at X University (XU). XU is a public, four-year, doctoral-level institution located in the southeast. It has a student population of just under 10,000. At XU, over one third of students identify within a minoritized racial or ethnic group and around 20% of students identify as military.

As director, Zahir leads the programmatic efforts for the BCC. All programming from the center is Black centric and uplifts Black culture, history, and the intersections of the Black identity. He manages the center's budget, oversees marketing efforts such as website design, event flyers, and social media. In the center, he has two direct reports: an administrative assistant and a graduate assistant. The center also employs a few student workers as well. The center also offers resources for students. A resource Zahir uplifted is that the center rents technologies to students such as laptops and scientific calculators. Technology is an expensive necessity for students and may be inaccessible for some students who engage with the center, so he appreciates that his center offers this service. At XU he also serves on various campus committees geared towards advancing the XU's mission and goals for student success, engagement, retention, and graduation.

Since his time at XU, student engagement in the BCC has increased. The center is the hub of Black student life and when it is activated in a way that encourages student participation and engagement with the center, its staff, and the center's initiatives/programs, increased engagement is possible according to Zahir.

> I've talked to a lot of students that have been here for years and they was like 'we haven't seen the cultural center like this… in a minute.' Even my admin - she's been here two years -...[she agreed that student engagement has increased]... Literally, our last day [of the semester] we had students in here until 4:30p. *Why are y'all here? Y'all been out of school a whole week? Y'all out of school. Why are y'all here?* They graduated, graduation has happened, we [cultural center staff] still here that next week. Students are coming in. *Why y'all here? Go, go to break. That's me, I'm like y'all go, go on break or something [laughing].* But it's like this is home, this is home. This is where we come, we are able to be ourselves and so I've even seen it, since just watching from month to month like foot traction and stuff. Students are in here *24/7.* Even today, we got snow and ice on the ground, we opened up and a lot of people was in the center. So, I think that has been a success.

Agenda Items

An agenda item for Zahir as the new director of the BCC was to rebrand the center and use DEI principles as the foundation for all of the initiatives, programs, and events that are produced under his leadership. Zahir defined diversity as "being able to celebrate the difference in people, in everyone." He explained diversity includes a myriad of identities from race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and religion. He believes it is "good for us to be different" and to "learn from [other people's] lived experiences." He defined equity as "making sure everybody has access [to] opportunity…the same resources… [and] removing barriers." Zahir explained inclusion as "valuing" people in their wholeness as multifaceted, layered human beings.

> Making sure that you value them not only… as a person but you value their voice. You value the work that they do. You are including them in everything; they have a seat at the table – that's one step, but at that table, you want them to speak up. You value their opinions. You value the different ideas that they may have. And so, that's what inclusion is to me. Is that I value you as a person. I want you to feel like you belong in this space, and I'm going to make sure that you have the space to express yourself, to communicate the things that you need, the things that you want to do, x, y, z.

It is important to underscore his definitions and understanding of DEI principles, as this informed how he approached his work in the center. Moreover, at the time of his start date at XU, the center did not have definitions for diversity, equity, and inclusion nor was there a set strategic vision for the center.

> I don't think I have a clear response for how the center itself defines DEI. I will say, as it relates to the mission and vision of the center it is what was created way back when [the center opened]. So, I haven't had the time to really just sit down and focus on the mission and vision. But I think with the cultural center, it depends on the person who's leading in that space, just because it's normally a one person center. However, that person shows up and decides to lead, that is gonna determine the atmosphere of this center. And so, for me I think the center is a reflection of who I am as a person as it relates to DEI. And so, we always have – [for example], I taught the students now to making sure that when students come in here you all make sure they feel welcome in here… Nine times out of ten, I would say I may be in my office, you know, doing work but when I do come out,

> I'm going to speak to our students; Ima say, 'hey, how are you doing?' Maybe have a little small conversation with them. I also educate students and our student workers when individuals enter the center we speak to them, make sure they feel welcome. We can tell them if they want to go over there [to] play pool or – yesterday they was doing an impromptu karaoke. If they want to go up there and do karaoke, like they have their opportunity to do that, they have their space to do that. And so, I don't – I can honestly say it [DEI] is not in the [BCC] mission. Just looking at what's on the website. It is not in our mission statement.

Here, Zahir explained that DEI were not clearly defined or practiced in the BCC. The words diversity, equity, and inclusion are not included in the center's mission statement. What is more, he shared that the center does not have stated goals that guide the center; thus, there are no foundational principles grounding the work that is produced from the center. The director at a given time "leads" the space. This means that if a director does not place DEI as core values, DEI may not be advanced or included in the work of the center. For Zahir, however, DEI principles guide the work he does in the center from cultural and social programs to educational programs and being welcoming to all.

Another agenda item for Zahir was to house student organizations under the BCC. Prior to Zahir, the center did not have any student organizations housed under it. "I'm actually shifting the culture to advise student organizations and spend more time on developing students as leaders." He wanted to launch this agenda item in a way that was authentic to him as a student-centered DEI practitioner.

> …So, when I got in this position, there were no organizations under my center… Since I've been here, I've created a gospel choir for Christian students that wanted

to sing… A Black male initiative, I started that as well because they didn't have one. And knowing that it's hard to retain minority male students in general, nationally [too]. Here, it’s worse. So, I created a men’s initiative for minority male students to help retain them, provide them with guidance and resources as they navigate college, but also talk about different topics that we struggle with as being Men of Color, attending a predominantly white institution, but also in today's society. And [the Women of Color initiative] is up and running as well… So, with establishing these organizations, I also had the opportunity to establish executive boards within these organizations. And so, helping to develop them into student leaders, coaching them on how to manage an organization. And not only are you leading an executive board, but you are leading a general population of students. How can I make sure that our programs and events are helping out with the student success rate with our minority students here at this predominantly white institution? So, pretty much all of my experiences from [my undergraduate institution], I have used them to come here and try to change not only the culture of the center itself but the institution as well. The institution has viewed this position – pretty much like an event planner. The only thing you’re doing is planning events for Black students. I'm like, it’s more than that if y’all really want to retain and see our minority students graduate. We're gon have to shift stuff.

He also discussed how the center, under his leadership, was now operating with an “expectation of excellence.” Zahir explained this concept as “being concerned about how you show up in spaces, being concerned about how you present yourself when you are communicating with different audiences.” An example of how Zahir recognized that

an expectation of excellence was not a part of the center's identity is when he saw a student organization's table setup during welcome week.

> One of my very first events [with the] student organizations was during student welcome week. Black student union… you want to know what was they poster? Their table stuff was a poster that they had handwritten [the organization's name, mission, and goals] with a pen…y'all don't have a tablecloth? You don't have different stuff that y'all can [display]? Y'all need to create a new board. Let's start there. Let's just create a new board because it was a white little poster board, not a tri-fold or anything. They wrote on it with the pen and just attached random pictures on the outside; that doesn't look presentable. At all. Look at everybody else boards around y'all. Granted, most of it was white organizations but my thing is, it don't take much to, you know, make something look nice. Even if you don't necessarily have the funds that they might have, you still can make it look nice and presentable to where it's not like y'all just threw this together type stuff. So, I think just being able to establish that um level of expectation of like everything we do, we need to put our best foot forward.

Another example of how Zahir established an expectation of excellence with his students was by teaching them about personal branding and personal style.

> I think another success has been – this [is] specifically for minority males – to actually see them want to enhance or grow their clothing attire. So, no one has ever told them in certain spaces you gotta dress professionally. This is what it looks like. You know, I'm not saying you have to dress like me 24/7, but certain spaces you gon have to put on a suit…So, having students come in and using

> resources like the [resource closet] to where they were able to go and get free articles of clothing, that was very – that was a big success for me. I had so many students that day come in my office [and say] ‘I got these shoes from the closet. I got these jackets [from the closet].’ Like, especially our men, [they said] ‘hey, our next Men of Color Initiative meeting we putting that stuff on!’…So, to see them make that connection of like, you know, we actually can dress up like this. Now the executive board [for the Men of Color Initiative are] communicating to them [general members] just dress up for the meetings. [I said] ‘we gon to take it baby steps. When we have our monthly meetings, y’all dress business professional.’ It [Men of Color Initiative] just got established last semester. The executive board like ‘naw, *e*very Thursday bare minimum we gon be dressed business casual. When we have our monthly meetings we gon dress business professional.’ And true enough, yesterday they all came in here dressed in business casual and things. I'm happy to see that. I'm happy to see that.

Moreover, Zahir had “positive experiences” with students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members in his efforts to establish lasting partnerships with them on behalf of the center. He collaborated with a few faculty members under the banner of the BCC and hosted some events. These faculty members, in turn, supported events he hosted in the center. He also connected with XU vice presidents, deans, and alumni to talk about his vision for the center and in the community, folks expressed interest in supporting the center. He detailed how connecting with the local community was also an important part of his vision for the center.

> I’ve had the opportunity to connect with them [community members] and they are really concerned about what's your plan for the center? You know and some of them will show up to different spaces and [are] willing to come and talk to the students. I mean, even now, I'm planning events for Black History Month and I reached out to local Black businesses for our kickoff event to come setup, come talk about your business. If you got food you want the students to sample food and different things like that. And they have been very excited to do that because I think just within [the city], I feel like, like I said, it's very conservative, so the Black businesses don’t get highlighted like they should.

Community building is something Zahir has been doing throughout his life as will be discussed later in his story. Nevertheless, he shared that building community included and extended beyond the XU campus. In considering that the city the institution is located in is predominantly white and so too is XU, he wanted to find ways to create a network of community-minded folks who also wanted to see his students succeed.

Furthermore, Zahir stated cultural centers serve as hubs for minoritized student engagement and have a responsibility to “produce minority leaders in the world.” He posited that the centers are uniquely positioned to do this as they employ several minoritized staff members. He uplifted this idea and explained that cultural center staff from marginalized communities need to “model” for minoritized students how to navigate challenges that are unique to them.

> …I think the cultural centers have a unique responsibility of not only educating students on how to navigate a society that primarily doesn’t look like them, but also modeling and leading the way on what does that look like, navigating the

> society or navigating certain spaces. Because I think it's one thing for us to communicate to them ‘hey, yes, you need to x, y, and z.’ However,…it hits different when they actually see us carrying it out ourselves because I think with anything people will – your actions will speak louder than your words. I actually found that to be true. So yes, I can communicate you need to do this, this, this. You need to – [for example], this is how you need to write emails or communicate professionally in emails. If they don't see me doing it, it’s just like it’s going in one ear and out the other. So, I think our cultural centers have that – it’s another level of responsibility on us to make sure that we are actually leading, modeling the way on how to navigate these spaces when we are in spaces that are not conducive to our growth and learning or when we are in spaces where we may be the only Person of Color. And what does that look like? So, yeah, I think in general, cultural centers, diversity offices have that responsibility to produce minority leaders.

Therefore, one of the aspects of BCC work for Zahir is about serving as a role model for minoritized students. He believes cultural center staff do not work in the centers for the sake of working in the centers – they have a responsibility to minoritized students to develop their leadership skills, educate them about how to navigate spaces that may be unwelcoming, hostile, or where they may the “token” Person of Color. In essence, cultural center staff in Zahir’s view should guide minoritized students on their leadership journey and prepare them to be engaged members of society.

Lessons From Mom and Grandmother

Zahir's perspective on DEI work was introduced to him during his upbringing. As an adolescent, Zahir did not understand the lessons his mother and grandmother were teaching him. Now, however, he credits them with teaching him how to be kind to everyone and be welcoming to others – values that are necessary for DEI practitioners. In reflecting on these lessons, he also explained that those values informed the formation of his DEI identity – someone who holds DEI ideals as a part of their identity.

> I want everybody to feel like they have a space, they have a voice, and they feel like they belong in that space... Reflecting back over my life, that has always been me. Whether that's with family or anything. I've always been [like] hey, let's bring everybody together [and] what you do is what you do, I'm not going to judge you. Ima accept you for who you are… Even before I really knew about diversity, equity, and inclusion. That had just always been at the forefront. And I think that comes from my background with my family. If you know my family, they know any and everybody. And my grandmother has always instilled in her children, my mother instilled in us, still today, my grandmother still talks to us about 'hey, be kind to people. It doesn't matter what they do to you, it matters what you do to them.' And growing up, that was something I grasped, especially in terms of – I'll just be very transparent – in terms of my father and stuff. She would always say 'hey, it's not what he do to you.' *I don't wanna hear that!* However, now I'm leading with that. I tell students 'it pays nothing to be nice.' I think being nice and kind of goes a long way, especially when it involves diversity, equity, inclusion and making sure that you are creating a space to where people feel like they

> belong, people feel like they have a voice, and that they are able to express their full, authentic self. So yeah, I would say I am a DEI professional. I think that is a part of my identity and not only in spaces of higher education, but even in my family…

Helping others is deeply rooted in Zahir's upbringing. The lessons from his mother and grandmother instilled values in him that have influenced his career path and how he engages with HESA work. He was taught to be kind to others and to build community – support those in need in any way he can.

> …It's been very evident even just growing up, I think it comes from my family. Community is one. I enjoy everybody coming together and being unified, that's something I thrive on. That's something that I love to see because I'm like why is [there] all this division? We could get a lot more work done if we all work together and what does that look like?...

Lessons From Graduate School

Zahir's graduate school experiences also informed how he understood his DEI identity. Now, he is better educated and has access to research, information, and theories on DEI work. He also better understands the power of his and his students' voices as tools for advocacy. As such, he reflected on some of his family's teachings and noted they are in opposition to what he believes he should do to effectively engage in DEI work.

> Um, over time I will say I have become more educated and more aware of how to communicate and articulate exactly what I mean when it relates to DEI. Making sure everyone has a voice; [I am] more educated on the LGBTQIA community for example, and making sure I support that student population as well and making

> sure the work that I'm doing and the support that I'm providing for them doesn't come off as what's the word I'm looking for? It's not uncomfortable for them. They still feel like oh, we can go to Zahir…So, I say enhancing awareness of things and being able to identify things, but also being able to develop my voice and speak up in spaces. Because [some] background on how I grew up – I wasn't always aware in high school, [for example], of different unequitable things that were taking place. And being with my family, I'll say this – was a hindrance. My family was still in the mindset of don't fight, don't fight back, don't push back, they were in that mindset. And sometimes they are still – my mom is still in that mindset of you shouldn't say this, or you shouldn't say that. I'm like no, it's not right. Like, we have to speak up about those things. So, being comfortable in developing my voice and speaking up and against those things that are injustices and unequitable opportunities, microaggressions, or whatever the case may be. That's how DEI has – working with other DEI professionals and being like 'no, you need to speak out against that…you have the responsibility to do that because if you don't they're going to continue to do it.'…

The lessons Zahir learned from his mother and his grandmother provided the foundation for how he approaches DEI work and how he understands his DEI identity. These lessons also illustrated for Zahir how he did not want to continue the cycle of "not pushing back" against issues affecting people such as when he witnesses injustices. As a graduate student, Zahir learned about theories (e.g., race, gender, sexuality); gained more access to information outside of his own lived experiences; and learned more about the concepts of DEI and how to practice them in his work and life.

"Where Am I Giving All My Time?:" Defining Moments – Middle

Reflecting on his time as an undergraduate student, Zahir noted he was introduced to HESA, initially, as a student leader. He looked around his campus and realized that, for instance, his advisor (in the diversity office), other staff members, and campus administrators were *working*. It was during his junior year that he determined he wanted to help students in his future career.

> But my junior year I had a moment, I vividly remember I was sitting in my room staying in [an apartment building]; I was like I don't think I want to do business information systems the rest of my life. Like, I always knew I wanted to work at a computer. I wanted to be able to put a suit on, go to work, but I never had a clear idea of what that would look like. And so, I just had a moment to where I [thought] like *where am I giving all my time to?* During this time, like, where is it going? And I realized most of it was going towards the student organizations that I was leading and making sure that my peers had everything they needed to be successful in the organization, but also at the institution as well. And so, many experiences that I had as a student leader in a diversity office whether that was – help[ing] students navigate a sexual assault case or help[ing] students find resources, funding resources, when students needed food, and stuff like that. As an undergraduate student I was doing that type work and not realizing, *hey, this is student affairs….*

To further elucidate his epiphany, his junior year is when he knew he wanted to help others, however, he had not yet decided to become a DEI practitioner. When he learned about the profession of HESA, he wanted to connect students with information

and resources to help them during their collegiate journey. It was not until he was searching for graduate programs and completing his master's that he realized he desired to continue working in a DEI space and eventually become a DEI practitioner.

> … At [my graduate institution] is when I realized or a light bulb went off like hey, how can I make sure that people who look like me have access to these resources? Access to these opportunities? What type of barriers need to be alleviated to make sure we are able to compete with our white counterparts?... So, for me, it was like, let me do all I can, learn this information to see how I can advocate for students, remove barriers for students, but also coach them and let them know, hey, you can compete with your white counterparts, this is how you that. That's really during that time is really when I was like, this is what I want to do. This is the work that I really am passionate about. This is what get me excited and get my brain running and being able to think strategically of how can I improve the lives of the students that come here…So, what can I do as a person to make sure y'all don't have to encounter this stuff?...

Importantly, prior to becoming the director of the BCC, Zahir was not "privy to" identity-specific centers. All of his experiences with DEI offices were under one unit that produced DEI programs for various identities (e.g., multicultural center). This is poignant as he entered X University with the mindset that his work in the BCC would be similar to a multicultural office. However, over the course of his eight months at the XU, he realized the BCC required a specific approach that privileges Blackness in all of its iterations, colors, and experiences.

> …In my experiences, compared to now, it's been more so of this is the diversity office where we serve Black and Brown populations, LGBTQIA student populations, x, y, z. So, everyone is in the same space. However, you have the direct contact person that you would go to regarding whatever program that you were involved in. And so, with that I think it shifted since I've been in this position because I entered this position with having that perspective of like, *hey, this will be something similar to what I was in at [my graduate institution].* However, now it is more so of making sure that I'm comfortable as being a Black person, as being a Black male, and being able to express that to students for them to understand, hey, be comfortable in your identity and show up in spaces as your full authentic self and be willing to celebrate all of Black culture. Everything that um embodies Black culture, be proud of that, celebrate that. So, that's why I think now with the cultural center it's a space for students or faculty and staff to be able to come into this space, and they can feel their authentic self. They don't have to um change who they are to try to fit into a space that doesn't fully accept them…

Purpose, Passion, and Position

During his graduate studies, Zahir was exposed to various areas in HESA including housing and residential life, student success, accessibility, the dean of students office, and DEI. At this time, his passion for working with minoritized populations intensified. He posited he wanted to work with minoritized populations because they often enter higher education under-resourced and with less information on how to navigate college life. Thinking about his own experiences in college and the barriers he

faced, he wanted to ensure students did not experience those same barriers. Moreover, the work he did with an early arrival program for Men of Color deeply resonated with him.

> …For one, we already knew the different barriers that the students were encountering when they came to [my graduate institution] as far as financial resources, as far as retaining African American male students. So that academic success piece, exposure to different opportunities and stuff.. And so, having that experience working with those students and to see them enter from a freshman student and to graduate and knowing that some of the stuff that they encountered, they navigated that seamlessly. I think that's when I was like, no, I want to continue to work in this type space because it's rewarding to me as a person, as an individual, to see people that look like me succeeding and elevating in life…And so, being able to see those students like I said from a freshman student, you don't even know if you're going to make you past your first semester. And having conversations about [how] you may need to separate yourself from the group of friends that you came with if you want to be intentional about being academically successful here, being involved in student organizations, having the opportunity to sit at these tables and advocate for yourself and stuff. Those experiences during that time, I really valued.

Zahir shared a story about how the early arrival program confirmed he was fulfilling his purpose to help students, working in a field he is passionate about, and was in the right position to pour into students' lives.

> I think one pivotal moment at [my graduate institution] is that um I had a student during the early arrival program, this was 2019... I had a conversation with a

> student... I went over to talk him…[and] he was like ‘I didn't think I would be here in this position.’ I was like ‘what you mean?’ He was like ….‘me walking into that [residence hall]. I was like, *wow!* Like, I'm really in college.’…He was telling me about his background and how he was in juvie for certain stuff growing up and different things like that. [He was a] first-generation student trying to figure it out. And so, I vividly remember telling him ‘there is always going to be a battle between who you were and who you tryna become. So, each day you have to make that constant decision, like, no, I'm not trying to revert to back who I used to be, I wanna move forward, and I wanna progress my life forward and things of that sort.’ And so, moments like that is what reassures me, hey, this is your purpose. This is your passion... And so, I just think just being in position, understanding community, and leaving things – I don't want people having to encounter things I had to encounter at the bare minimum.

Zahir shared two major defining moments in his life. The first occurred his junior year of undergraduate; at this time, he determined he wanted to pursue a career in HESA. The second defining moment occurred during a conversation with a student who participated in an early arrival program his graduate institution hosted. These two moments were indicative of Zahir moving in his purpose in his career. For him, his fulfilling his purpose means helping others and building community.

Wipeout: How Institutional Challenges Against DEI Efforts Inform DEI Work Within the XU Black Cultural Center

The principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion have not guided the work at XU, according to Zahir. As such, the current political climate around dismantling these

efforts have not informed how DEI is demonstrated on campus or within the BCC. As an example, Zahir explained the institution and cultural center's definitions of DEI "hasn't shifted because it was never really ingrained into the institution... They just got a chief diversity officer in 2019." However, one area that was shaped by the larger anti-DEI policy reform agenda is the reversal of affirmative action. Now, the endowed scholarship overseen by the BCC must be open to all students and not just Black and African American students.

> …It's been more so of making sure the material you put out it's not geared towards one race. So, I had to take everything that is produced from the center that was like Black, African American I have to take all that out regarding scholarships, all of that type stuff. So, I think it's a challenge in that sense of we still wanna do the work but we also having to censor our language in terms of marketing materials. We can't explicitly say this is for Black male students, [for example], [we] can't say this is for male students. I have to be creative on how I market to the demographic of students that I'm trying to engage with. So, I say [that has been a] challenge in that sense…

Zahir noted, however, he has not faced any barriers working with alumni and foundations to continue offering scholarships through the BCC. "They've been reaching out and they have been very willing to put whatever language we want to go in the scholarships to still make sure we generate the demographic of students we want the scholarship to generate."

Zahir also discussed how institutional culture shaped how the BCC is perceived on campus. The center is viewed as the programming space for Black folks. He detailed how this negatively (re)produced a lack of institutional support.

> I think it's also important to – the culture of XU and the culture of the city really plays into why I haven't been receiving a lot of pressure [regarding] what I should and should not be doing in this space. I say that because the center at XU campus is viewed as – this is the space for Black students. *That's it*...There's no institutional support. The current climate nationally has semi been the climate of XU before now and everything has been on paper and in systems. Meaning that most of the policies here at XU whether it's regarding student organizations or overarching policies at XU do not benefit minority students. Most of the challenges that XU is experiencing in terms of student success [and] retention rates really stems from not retaining our minority students and not making sure they have been successful here… Instead of getting down to really increase our overall student success, if we focus on our minority students and retain them, being that they are a big population of our demographic of students here, that will improve the overall student success. And so,… we not having those *real* conversations and being willing to challenge people to grow. Yeah. So, I think that plays into how the institution views the center [and] plays into the overall climate.

A lack of understanding and support from the institution and the division of student affairs regarding the work produced by the BCC contributed to Zahir's frustration with XU. Some of his colleagues in the division operate in silos, as such, everyone does not know what the center does beyond "offering programs for Black folks."

> …the institution [does] not understand exactly what student affairs does. It's one thing to have support from the institution, but I think – it's another thing for the

> institution to actually *understand* what we do, and that's just our division. We have – it's people in the division that been here 16 years and they have been like 'no one has ever [told us about what the center does].' We are in a phase of retelling [our story]. This is what we do as a student affairs division type stuff. I'll say that's probably been one of the most real challenges… [is] institutional support. …The institution as a whole doesn't support [the center]. I will say there are different faculty and staff that supports the center, they will stop by, go to different programs, and stuff like that but as an institution, I don't think the support is where it needs to be.

Zahir noted the lack of institutional support from senior-level administrators, which cascaded down the chain of command, further boxed in the BCC as solely the programming space for Black folks. This narrative put the center in a precarious position with regard to how the staff activated the center as a space that developed leaders, celebrated the richness of the Black diaspora, and engaged the campus community in cross-cultural dialogue, for instance.

> Just to be fully transparent – as in this happened yesterday – the president hasn't stepped foot in the center. At all. Yesterday we had the door open cause they was in here loud, [and] it got hot, so… we propped the door open... So, if you walk past [the center], you gon be like oh, it sound fun in there. Like, what's going on? I kid you not. I sit here and saw the president walk straight past here. Do you even think he tried to stick his head in here for one minute? But to say you celebrate diversity, equity, and inclusion; I need yo actions to align up with that. You know, at least come in the center. You know, the students don't know you. My students

be like 'yeah, we don't know him. We only see him walking [around campus], but he never been in here in my whole four years.' Granted, he only been here two years, but he never been in here in two and a half years. So, it's different stuff like that. That me, as a professional, I pay attention to cuz I'm like it's the small stuff that matter.

Zahir explained that another institutional barrier was that XU did not have clear definitions or goals regarding DEI. Therefore, there were no institutional DEI efforts, or an ethos associated with how XU as an institution would implement DEI principles across the university. He shared a story about how XU's lack of effort towards DEI was present in a faculty and staff affinity group. XU established the group, however in the current sociopolitical climate, the group walked on "eggshells" as it related to the types of programs they were planning to host.

For example, they just started the Black Faculty Staff Association in 2020. Why now, in 2024, the association itself is even on eggshells about what we can and cannot do being an affinity group at this university? And we have vice presidents that are actively in the organization. It's not like really celebrated or anything. They say it's more so yeah, we glad y'all gotta have an affinity group, but what actual work are you doing as an institution to celebrate that?

He shared another story about how XU's lack of effort towards DEI manifested during a unity walk – an event that was marketed as a celebration of XU's diversity. However, what he experienced was not what was marketed.

…As an institution, we had a unity walk during homecoming with athletics. They invited me to come speak; I spoke. It's not a [unity] walk cuz the only people here

are athletes. And then they not even walking, mingling in. They walking in they own separate uh sports. You got soccer right here. You got track right here. You got basketball right here. Football all the way back, but that's not unity. You can clearly see the gaps in the lines – like, that’s not unity to me. We all just walking. We are walking, we are exercising, that is what we doing. So, there have to be more intentional ways to enhance DEI efforts on campus and making [sure] that as a university – these are the exact steps we taking as it relates to DEI. In your individual colleges, offices, and stuff; this is a part of X University’s DNA. I don't think – and this is coming from [me] as a new employee – I don't think that was highlighted in my onboarding for the university. I know it wasn't even highlighted in student affairs because I didn't have an onboarding in student affairs.

He added XU did not have a “big program that highlights diversity, equity, and inclusion.” He explained that although the institution offered DEI training, they often did not leave a lasting impact on participants. “Yes, we have all the training that everybody needs, however, you get training and do what with it?” Zahir also suspected the lack of DEI efforts at XU was maybe a byproduct of the institution’s geographic location within a “very, very conservative” state.

…The mission, as in like the words [this is the mission statement].The vision, there is nothing in there about…diversity, equity, and inclusion. And then our values [are to be community oriented]. So, even from like the words, that doesn't embody diversity, equity, and inclusion for me. And I think this is something that I was talking with [the chief diversity officer] about… [For example], Shaun

> Harper, I seen on LinkedIn, did an article about how institutions are changing or becoming very creative with not saying diversity, equity, and inclusion. Like, we *don't* need to be doing that, it's diversity, equity, and inclusion, and we need to call it what it is and stop trying to deviate from it. Another article was like we *have* to be creative because…these are people's livelihood… So, they're going to do whatever they need to do to maintain they job, but you can still do that [DEI] work on the side… [At X University] I think they are trying to be creative and not really use diversity, equity, inclusion given the context that we are in [a conservative] state…If it was [the capital city], I think it would be a difference because [the capital city] is more progressive. [This city] mmm [shakes head no]. It's very conservative, very conservative…

Another challenge Zahir identified was how to tow a "thin line" between advancing DEI efforts unapologetically in the BCC and altering how he conducted his work so as to not offend anyone or be rendered noncompliant with institutional policies and state law.

> I say [a] challenge from a professional level… it's a thin line to – no, Ima stick to… what is true, and this [is] diversity, equity, and inclusion – I'm not changing the words, I'm not being creative for how to do it, this is black and white. This is what it looks like. Or on the other side, no, we need to be creative…we still can do the work, but there's a different way we have to go around it, so we [don't] catch any backlash from the university or from the state. So no, it hasn't changed my philosophy about what cultural centers should be doing, but it has been

> challenging [to]… do the work without getting any repercussions or any backlash from the state or the university.

An example of how he "towed the line" was that he contacted XU's legal department to inquire about whether he could offer the Men of Color Initiative and other specialized programs in the BCC. He wanted to ensure he was compliant with state and institutional policies related to DEI.

> … When I first created [the] Men of Color Initiative, it was produced from the center last semester, so everything I put out had to be very generalized. So, it wasn't Men of Color Initiative, this is an organization geared towards minority male students. I couldn't say that in the language just because it was coming from [the] BCC. But when I shifted – which this was always the goal, to shift to a student organization – now that language can come from the students because it's a student organization. So, they can explicitly say in their constitution and bylaws this is an organization for minority male students: Hispanic, Latinx, and Black male students. I'll say that was in support to make sure I'm aligning with the law...

"I'm Tired:" How Anti-DEI Discourse Shapes the Spirit

Zahir described how anti-DEI discourse and policies challenged him as a DEI practitioner and personally. DEI work was something he did that required all of him. His mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness were informed by his DEI work. Put another way, his job impacted his wellbeing. He shared that mentally, he was worried about how his students would fare if the BCC was defunded. Certain educational, social, and cultural programming would no longer be available if the center was defunded. Zahir

also noted the scholarships offered by the BCC were helpful, particularly to Black and African American students, who were disproportionately impacted by financial barriers at XU. He added that if the center was defunded an immense amount of pressure would fall on him as the director, to secure private funding for the center's programs and scholarships.

> … And so, mentally for me, I think there will be a pressure on how [do] I find the funding that's not coming from the state to where I can still be able to do everything we was doing. But also, I have a heart for people and I'm really realizing that – so I hate when I think about my students that came to X University to get out of their current situation or change the trajectory of their lives – and now, like all this funding is gone, but this may be the only place that really kept them here in school. This really gave them the extra boost to get up every day and go to class cuz I know I'm going to [the] BCC after class. So, what does it look like for them not having scholarships or not even just having a space where they can fully say it belongs to them, they feel safe, they feel they authentic self…

Zahir described how the weight of doing DEI work affected his physical health. The weight of producing high-level DEI programs while the ability to do this work was being chipped away little by little was " a lot."

> …You are constantly thinking of different ways to find money. Personally, trying to network – and I think this plays in the mental part too – trying to discern if people, if they really genuine about what they are doing, if they really are going to support you. Physically, that weighs heavy on you. You're tired even when you

> are sleeping. Your mind is constantly running, so you gon wake up in the morning, you're still tired. And you constantly on the move. So basically, it's a lot. It's a lot. I think in all aspects mentally, physically, emotionally – it becomes a lot because you are constantly on the move. You're constantly trying to – *okay, if I'm not getting funding from here, who can I go to?* So, it takes a lot of time to research. Whether it's grants or researching people in a local community that's willing to donate and then having to set up a meeting with them, then actually go meet with them, and then sit down and communicate x, y, and z. It physically becomes a lot and weighs your body, your physical health, and stuff like that.

However, in an effort to prioritize his physical health, Zahir tries his best to lead an active lifestyle and "intentionally schedule to rest."

> And for me, that looks like I have to leave the city in order to fully rest because once I'm here, I'm constantly thinking about…things that I need to do. If I'm outside of the city, I can really rest. I'm not concerned about anything that's going on in the city, I'm in Miami or whatever.

Emotionally, the discourse around DEI was "frustrating" and "disheartening" for Zahir. He posited that what was occuring was especially frustrating because of the strides the nation collectively took to create equitable opportunities in upper management positions for minoritized communities, for instance, after the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

> I would say it's very frustrating just because I think there was a small glimpse – and when I say a small glimpse, I mean like a small glimpse – of our nation moving forward but now it's like we…about to revert back into the civil rights

> movement. Just because [of] everything going on, it's like they really trying to wipe everything out and it’s very disheartening. Just to know everything that we encountered as a [Black] people in 2020, even before 2020. And now this education that supposedly was taking place on diversity, equity, and inclusion, challenging people to do better, educating them on how to work with people and it’s like we get to 2024, 2023, and it's like all of that went out the window. So, it's very disheartening…

Zahir’s sentiments on how quickly the nation has seemingly turned away from wanting to progress ideals of diversity, equity, and inclusion not only in theory but through policies and demonstrated actions emphasizes that DEI work for him is contextualized in such a way that it permeates throughout all facets of his life.

Moreover, similar to the efforts he put into his physical health, Zahir prioritized his spiritual health as a Christian. Doing this work “challenged” him to “be very intentional with spending time with God.” He explained that “I know I’m in a season regarding this work that I can't do it with my own strength.”

> … It becomes physically, mentally, emotionally overwhelming… [When] I’m watching church service and those are times where I'm able to really just release everything that has been overwhelming or challenging over that month, year, or whatnot. I'm able to do that. And so, He [God] has challenged me to know that even though I may feel like I'm alone in this, I know I’m not alone. And I know I cannot do this in my own will. I have to be spiritually connected with God and allow Him to empower me with His strength to continue doing this work. That has definitely been my prayer…

Zahir planned to cast the weight of this work onto God and believed that God would "empower" him in ways that would allow him to go forth in this work. So, for Zahir it was not a matter of *could* he do DEI work in the midst of all these challenges; it was that he needed to have faith and *know* that God positioned him to do this work. So, with God's "strength" he would be able to endure and overcome any challenges that may come in his path.

"Charged:" A Counterstory– End

Zahir works in a state that is impacted by anti-DEI legislation. He believed a major challenge for DEI professionals in his state is "for us DEI professionals to stay true to the definition [of DEI] and making sure we are still doing the work that we know it requires for us to do." Although DEI work is being challenged across the US at this time, Zahir said he would "stand" on what he believed and continue to advance DEI. He also said if individuals were not open to challenging themselves or were not open to learning about DEI, there was only so much "grace" he would extend them. This is important to note because although Zahir believed everyone should be celebrated regardless of their background, he drew issue with challenges against DEI principles and with some HESA professionals who knew or should have known about the importance of those principles.

> …How can I as a professional [say] – this is the definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion, this is what it means, and this is the work that is required. Staying true to that, no matter what everybody else is doing, this is what I need to be doing as a professional… I know what I believe in and I'm going to stand on it. And so, actively still engaging in conversations relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion and challenging those that maybe have a different perspective of what

that looks like, showing up in spaces as my true authentic self….[Also] being willing to call people out when they need to be called out… We in 2024. If you 50-60 [years old and] you are saying something I don't agree with, that goes against what I believe diversity, equity, and inclusion is, I'm going to call you out. Yes, I would do it in a very respectful manner, but you're gonna…understand what I'm trying to articulate but also understand that like, hey, you need to grow in this area. So yeah, I think we are in a era where, you know, people want to extend grace and I think grace needs to be extended at times, but there's also times where you have to check people… My thing is we've had countless trainings, workshops on what it means to be to celebrate diversity, equity, and inclusion. At this point, you just don't want to change or challenge yourself as a person…

An example of how he is staying true is by defining DEI for himself and naming how it should be demonstrated. "You should celebrate different cultures, the different lived experiences that they bring to an environment, to a space." This idea stemmed from his definition of diversity and undergirded his counternarrative about anti-DEI efforts. He offered that regardless of how he felt personally, "everyone should have equitable opportunities and access to different things."

… And so, I think – I *know* people – everybody should be included. I think of the student who wanted to do the ballroom thing. Just because I do not identify with the [LGBTQIA] community that doesn't – you wanna to do it? How can I make sure your idea you want to do comes life? This is something that you want to do…I want to see you in your light, having a good time, doing something that you love to do. So, my job is to make sure I create that space and environment for you

> to be able to do that... And so, that's the way I approach different situations, different scenarios. I'm like what one person does shouldn't really affect me. I should, as a professional, in terms of students – what they want to do [I should] help them bring their vision to life, making sure they feel like they belong in a space, making sure they feel included in this space….What do I need to do to make sure you feel like you belong, and you have a voice at the table? And you are able to use your voice at that table…

Moreover, Zahir was committed to educating people about DEI. His philosophy of celebrating everyone and upholding the principles of DEI shapes how he plans to continue advancing DEI even if the doors to the center are closed indefinitely.

> Let's say, tomorrow they debunk diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Nine times out of ten, Zahir is not going to have a job. However, that doesn't mean that I can't still do the work. No one can stop me from going in here and still educating the students on this is what it look like for you to navigate a predominantly white space or for you to address microaggressions, implicit/explicit biases. For one, this is a public institution, let's just start there. Second, if I am no longer an employee here, you have freedom of speech spaces on campus. So, I can go out there and speak about it all day just because this is what I believe in. I can still model the work and still be that mentor for students… I hear all the politicians talking about what they believe in [regarding] DEI and debunking it, doing away with it and stuff. And that hasn't shifted my philosophy or my belief. If anything, it has charged me to continue to do the work… and making sure I am in spaces to where people that look like me is not constantly

having these conversations…And so, it has charged me to go into the spaces and making sure that we are still educating our people [on] what DEI is, but also how to navigate those issues as they arise.

In spite of all the challenges against DEI, Zahir is hopeful that in due time, XU will begin to expand its DEI efforts. As an example of how XU had made strides in those efforts, the institution's administration added DEI to the university's strategic plan. He also hopes his generation and the generations after him will continue to advance DEI efforts in HESA. He hopes that there are radical change makers in "high level spaces" that will advocate for DEI and if they cannot do this – hopefully the folks outside of those spaces will be "prepared" to "battle" to keep DEI thriving.

> Being that – and this the other side of me– our generation and the generations after us are not like our grandparents and [our] parents' generations or our great grandparents. Not saying they [weren't] very strong people, they endured a lot, they paved the way for a lot. But I also think they dealt with a bunch of stuff that we not going to deal with. We not gon pretty much let a lot of stuff fly. And I think that is still present even when we communicate with them, certain stuff they be like 'oh, you should just deal with, put up with it, don't say nothing.' And for us, it's like, nah, nah, I'm not finna do that. And so, I think there's still hope in that sense that we still have people that are still going to continue to fight and address those issues in different type of high level spaces, but people who are not in those spaces – if it came down to it, we will be ready to battle if we need be. I ain't trying say we gon get into no war type stuff, hopefully, it don't go there. I'll say we will be prepared in a sense.

Synopsis

When Zahir began his undergraduate studies, he did not imagine he would be working in HESA. He thought he would become an engineer because he wanted to embark on a career where he could “sit at a desk,” “do something on a computer,” and “dress up.” Today, however, as a community-oriented HESA professional and soon-to-be Dr. Zahir, he believes deeply in the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion to the extent that he will find ways to do this work within or outside of higher education if DEI efforts are completely dismantled in his state. Moreover, the lessons from his mother and grandmother and his faith imbued him with a sense of purpose that guided his life and career. Now, he is walking in his *purpose*, doing work he is *passionate* about, and in a *position* to help students grow and develop into the next generation of leaders.

> For me, this is just like my personal perspective, just thinking about it, one word that came to mind is transformational. I think with this type of work we actually – if you really think about it – have a responsibility when we encounter these students…to have transformational encounters with them. What can I do to help you change the trajectory of your life in a positive way? And so, I think that will really define the work that I do here…

Dr. Monique

Dr. Monique is a higher education and student affairs professional with over 14 years of experience in the field. She received a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies with foci in marketing and leadership studies. She has two master's degrees, one in college student affairs with a concentration in conflict resolution and one in nonprofit management. She also has a PhD in educational research and leadership (higher education administration). She identifies as a young, Black woman "in every space that I enter," as a first-generation student, and as a person raised in a single parent household. She also identifies as Caribbean American. She shared that "my mother migrated here in the seventies. And I'm the first-generation also born in America, like in the 50 States. So, that's also a big piece of my identity." She is a member of a historically Black Greek letter sorority and is "like the most Greek-y person in a lot of my friend groups." Her membership in her sorority is "a large part of my identity and how I show up in the world." She is also a published author and world traveler.

Additionally, she was a specialist in the diversity and inclusion center at Flash U. Flash U is a private, four-year research institution in the Midwest. The student enrollment is approximately 16,000. The institution is home to a large population of non-resident students as well as a robust international student population hailing from over 100 countries. International students represent approximately 20% of the student population and Students of Color represent around 35% of the student population. Dr. Monique was in her role for three years. Now, she is searching for her next opportunity in HESA.

Becoming: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning

Dr. Monique's first position in HESA was as a paraprofessional at her undergraduate institution. She worked as an academic advisor within her major – interdisciplinary studies – for two years. Upon graduating she went on to be a graduate assistant in student involvement and leadership. She gained full-time professional experience working in an office for a vice president, as a program coordinator, as well as in residential life. In the fall of 2016, she began her doctoral program and held two graduate assistantships across two years. Her experiences ranged from graduate programs, a for-profit institution, PWIs, and HBCUs. During her dissertation phase she left the south where her doctoral institution was located and headed to the west coast where her family lived at the time. She describes that period as her "gap year."

> …My first year in [the city] I didn't touch my document at all. I did nothing. So, I consider it my gap year. So, a lot of folks do their gap year, you know, from high school to undergrad or between undergrad and grad, but I actually did mine in the middle of my doc program. And I just traveled the world. I [also] worked – I drove for Uber and with my Uber money I took my family to Europe. I went to Japan. I went to a couple of different islands. I was really outside, and this was before Covid, so I was really having a great time in [the city].

After her gap year she wanted to work in a university setting again because driving for Uber was too physically demanding. She went on to be hired as an administrative assistant in student conduct at a higher education institution on the west coast. Then, in January 2020 she began searching for a new HESA position and left her administrative assistant role in May of 2020. Importantly, she explained that her job searching process

was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic because many higher education institutions canceled job openings and implemented hiring freezes. However, in the fall of 2020, one of the institutions she interviewed with, Flash U, contacted her to serve as a consultant for a student advisory board that was being created to develop recommendations for the development of an inclusive co-curricular experience for students. She worked with the advisory board until the project was completed. Next, she accepted a role at an HBCU in the same city as Flash U; however, before she began her transition to the role, she requested the title of the position align with her experience, education, as well as align with the title of that her predecessor held. The institution did not "work with her," so she accepted the role at Flash U.

> They chose not to give me the title and Flash U was offering me more money and my mentors were like this institution will be a better fit, better title on your resume, the job title is better, and all these other things. And I was like, okay, I'm going to listen to y'all. And so, I took the position at Flash U and the center as a training education specialist.

Flash U

When Dr. Monique began her role as the training education specialist, she was responsible for two workshops and two events per month regarding DEI topics (e.g., cultural heritage month programs, diversity workshops). However, she explained she went above the call of duty and facilitated more than four programs per month and set this as standard for the center.

> …Let me tell you, I'm not a mediocre or subpar employee. I gave him [supervisor] an entire semester's worth of programming. I started in January. The

> following month is Black History Month. I had a full Black history month program. I just looked at the graphic two weeks ago and we had six or eight programs already ready to go. I literally started weeks before, and I kept up that same momentum. So, by the time I left our programming calendar was anywhere from 10 to 15 programs a month. And the majority of that work was done by myself.

She also took on additional roles within and outside of her office. One additional role was marketing and communications. “

> …So, [for] my entire department I did all the marketing/communications. And I started doing that pretty much in February of ‘21. So, I came on board, I saw there was a lack of marketing, and I was like we're not getting ready to play – my programs need to be promoted. And I wanna be confident in the work that's being put out to promote. So, I just took over it all. And then I ended up still being over all of that until I left.

Dr. Monique hosted over 300 identity-based programs over the course of her three years at Flash U. The programs centered Black, Indigenous, Latine, LGBTQIA+, international, women, disability, Asian American and the various intersections of these identities. She emphasized that she collaborated with the center’s student employees to create their schedule of programs for the year. They used affinity or heritage/cultural months as “anchors” and then additional programs were developed to ensure students from various backgrounds felt seen – not only during a calendar month that was dedicated to their culture/identity but – throughout the entire academic year.

> …So, when you think about Hispanic Heritage History month, Black History month, Women's History Month, Asian or APIDA Heritage History Month, etcetera, those are kind of the anchors for the programming, right? So, we start thinking about the calendar on a monthly basis…Then you also had to think about the one off holidays. For example, so like Columbus Day has been renamed Indigenous Peoples' Day or something like that, so reframing, celebrating, and recognizing our Indigenous students. I really wanted to focus on people really thinking about identity and diversity from more lenses…So, that's when I started introducing our work around disability. And there is a disability resources office on the campus, but they weren't doing any programming. And I really wanted to make sure that those students saw themselves in the work as well. So, I really focused on the identities that are 'traditional' essentially, but then I also wanted to think about things that people aren't thinking about enough. I also thought about the intersections of identity, so that led to a lot of programming…

In addition, when Dr. Monique developed programs, she was intentional with every aspect of the planning phase. As an example, for programs that centered on the spectrum of ability, she ensured her programs were inclusive by selecting accessible places to host them. She explained many buildings on the Flash U campus are old and therefore are not built with accessibility at the forefront of the buildings' designs.

> So, Flash U's physical campus is not the most physically accessible space. And so, there are certain buildings that I just didn't hold programming in, because I knew that if any student or faculty or staff member tried to come and they might be in a wheelchair or they have any type of physical difficulties, they couldn't

> enter the space. And so, we, you know, did a lot of programming in the center of campus to make it easier for people to find parking, to get to buildings that have elevators and ramps, and push button doors. And thinking about that I also did a lot of collaboration with other offices on campus to make sure that we were bringing additional resources to folks or connecting them with resources that they wouldn't normally interact with and to bring more awareness to certain identities.

The Awakening: From an Unconscious to Conscious DEI Identity

Prior to starting her role at Flash U, Dr. Monique had previously worked with Students of Color and other students from marginalized backgrounds; however, she did not consider those experiences as DEI work. She acknowledged that in the first few months of working in the center, the way she approached planning DEI programs shifted. She learned how to develop programs that would reach a broader audience and also developed programs that highlighted the intersectional identities and experiences of students.

> ….And so, Black History Month is one of my favorite months to plan and it was one of my first introductions into being able to do this work…So, really thinking about this lens of how do I make programming that is about Black people, but for everyone else to come into the space and to learn and be educated?...So, like for example, Black and queer identities, right? So, everyone who identifies as Black and straight might not know all they need to know about Black and queer folks in the way that they live their lives or the experiences that they have positive or negative, right? And so, really trying to make programs whether they're workshops or events that were relevant and interesting enough for people within

> the identities that are being celebrated, but also outside of those identities to want to engage with the work. And so, that was my first exposure to addressing DEI and really thinking about it from my own personal lived experience and that lens, but how to do it in a professional setting in which I want people to show up to my programs…And so, that is how I continued to frame my work in the center because I knew that I had to serve the entire student body, not just a particular identity on a daily basis…

Pointedly, Dr. Monique doing DEI work for the past three years helped her mold her DEI identity. For her, developing a DEI identity meant standing in one's truth.

> Yeah, I definitely do think I have a DEI identity…I think for myself the type of reputation I built around my workshops and my programs was that number one, I'm gonna fully show up as myself authentically. I may or may not code switch depending on the situation or the audience but I'm gonna fully show up as myself in whatever situation it is. But then, also, I'm going to just be honest in the content I'm giving you, the experiences that I'm sharing with you, and I would hope that you would be honest with me. And I always try to make sure that I thanked people for being vulnerable because really sometimes we're digging into these topics or conversations, and this is the first time you've thought about this or the first time you've engaged with people that don't look like you and that can be challenging. And so, I was just always grateful that people were open and vulnerable in those settings…And so, I just feel like my identity for DEI is about vulnerability, it's about openness, truth – walking in your own truth.

She added her DEI identity evolved over time going from an unconscious to a conscious part of her identity.

> …The way that I would describe it is an unawareness of having this identity to an awareness of having this identity. So, from my grad programs through 2020, so that would be 2012 to 2020. So, eight years was like this unawareness of doing this work, right? Like, I just knew what area that I was passionate about, what types of students I wanted to work with, [and] the fact that I wanted to be a student affairs professional…. Then, the end of 2020 to now has been basically all DEI focused. And so, being more aware, having a title, an office space that is dedicated to this work, and just being more cognizant of what I was doing and how I was showing up for people.

Her time in the center helped her better understand what DEI work is and how it can take shape within various HESA student support areas. Moreover, for Dr. Monique, DEI work was never associated with a DEI designated spaces. She was doing what higher education calls “DEI work” in non-designated DEI spaces in various roles. Thus, DEI is not simply indicative of a physical location; DEI is employed in action, practice, and values.

Lessons From HESA – Middle

Dr. Monique recalled that throughout her educational experiences from time as an undergraduate through her doctoral program, she could have used more support services to help her along her journey. Her reflection triggered deep emotional responses. She discussed how an assignment for her master’s degree in college student affairs shed light on the HESA profession and her own educational experiences in ways that interrupted what she originally thought about the field. After interviewing Dr. B (pseudonym), an

administrator at her undergraduate institution, she took heed of her suggestion to apply for doctoral programs in HESA; however, she regretted not attending an HBCU for her doctoral program. Dr. Monique noted the interview with Dr. B and her own higher education experiences shaped how she wanted to show up differently for students.

> …I interviewed – it's still funny to me to this day but at my undergraduate institution there's a lady named Dr. B who I thought was our vice president of student affairs. This lady was never our vice president of student affairs [VPSA], but because she was so engaged [with students] I thought that's what her title was. She was actually like the vice president of like student enrollment and enrollment management and something else. We had a whole other – there was actually a man who served as the VPSA at that time. I went and interviewed her because I thought that's what she was. She told me that if I wanted to be a vice president one day I needed to get my doctorate degree. And so, listening to her feedback, I… started to look at doctoral programs. I wish to this day that I had gone with my first mind and attended an HBCU for my doc program. My experience at [a PWI in the south] was not the best. And um it just – I just could've spent my energy somewhere else. So, those two pieces really encouraged me to number one, to continue in this field, to stay on this academic path, to go ahead and get my doctorate degree. But also, when I think about student experience and support and advice that's given to people is to let them know like 'hey, this is just my experience. You need to make a decision that makes sense for you.' [I want] to really help people to weigh their pros and cons and to navigate how to make decisions they're not gonna regret later. And then, also really showing support to

> Black graduate students because I recognize that Black graduate students do not get nearly the level of support and attention and resources that undergraduate students receive or their counterparts in other grad programs…

Unfortunately, in her professional capacity at Flash U Dr. Monique experienced a lack of support from her colleagues and supervisors as well. She recalled a tense situation between a group of Black students that occurred within the Black living learning community. The incident resulted in a weeks-long series of events. She shared this incident was exceptionally challenging to navigate because of her own identities and campus leadership positions because those elements shaped how she approached working with the students.

> …The students were having a meeting because they were trying to prepare for a protest on campus, but they got sidetracked because someone decided to bring forward information that did not pertain to them and was really harmful. But basically, they were trying to say that they felt that people were being predators in their community. Unfortunately, they don't really understand what that term means. So, they were using it incorrectly and potentially trying to 'expose' their peers. So, I had to step in to mediate and de-escalate the situation. [I] had several one on one meetings with different students because residence life did not feel that they were equipped to resolve the situation. And so, it was frustrating because I shouldn't be the Black employee that's already doing this work with these students [in the center] to then have to come in and save the day because y'all are uncomfortable having this conversation with them, and I'm not even trained 'necessarily' to do this work. So, that was a very challenging space…[and] trying

> to make sure that the students that they were claiming were causing harm, made sure that they were okay. And the students that were trying to expose their peers help them understand that when you use language like that, and you try to expose somebody you could be completely changing the trajectory of their future and you don't know what you're talking about. And so, it was a very challenging situation and to have to be the person who was in the middle of all of that for a few weeks was just genuinely like a very taxing experience. And I, to this day, while it's something that I can talk about, you know, my conflict resolution skills in interviews, it's still one of the most sad parts of my experiences because my students are really going through it. And because it was happening within the Black community, people were picking sides and there was a lot of turmoil that came of that. And so, it was just – to this day I'm still very like *ugh* about the whole situation.

Dr. Monique also shared how the burden of addressing this tense incident was placed on her shoulders as one of the “DEI experts” on campus. She explained her educational background and some of her professional experiences helped her navigate this incident, however, she firmly believes she should not have been asked to intervene in this situation.

> No. No, I wasn’t prepared necessarily because it's not the work that I do. So, thinking about the fact that we have residential life staff, we have RSVP center staff, which is our area for sexual violence and prevention, those people should have been the ones to intervene in that area, because they do that work on a daily

> basis. I don't work in res life. I don't work in RSVP. I don't have anything to do with those topics on a regular, on a typical every day…

Today Dr. Monique is still feeling the remnants of that incident. It deeply impacted her emotionally. She detailed the way she was approached to help with this situation was haphazard, especially considering the incident took place outside of the scope of work she did in the center. “I had a conversation with my supervisor asking me did I want to do it.” She was “asked” to mediate the situation and did not receive any support from other HESA professionals who may have been better equipped to address this issue or could have worked alongside her during the mediation. Additionally, once the issue was resolved, she received some “thank you emails from the other staff members that I did it. But that's it.” She was asked to do additional work that placed her in a position where she experienced mental, emotional, and mental distress. Further, she did not receive any support regarding her wellbeing or additional compensation. She added the experience overall was the “Black tax defined.”

Nobody’s Superwoman: “They Expect Everything From Me”

When Dr. Monique worked at Flash U she engaged service to the university as an executive member of the Black faculty and staff affinity group, through advising student organizations, as a general academic advisor, via committee work, among other roles outside of the center. In this way, she took on an array of extra labor.

> …I also served as the president of our Black Faculty and Staff Cabinet. So, that's an employee resource group and I was the leader of that space. I also was taking over all of the National Pan-Hellenic Council [NPHC] programming…community building because in spring of ‘22 the assistant director for that work quit

> prematurely and they asked for some assistance because I had already been working with those groups in a way. And for the last two years I've been carrying all that work without compensation. I was compensated for the first semester and then I was not compensated after that. I completely transformed what the support looks like for NPHC... In addition to those two things, I also advised the majority of our Black student organizations, including our Black Graduate Student Association and I was a four-year advisor for other students for their academics. And so, I was doing everything for everybody all the time. Which is again, why I go back to that point around why I wasn't given any opportunity to advance was really frustrating, because I'm consistently showing up in all of the ways for all of the people. And you have employees who come to work, sit in the living room, look at each other, have little conversations, eat lunch and all this stuff, but you're not doing any work. So, there are people who are in these roles, are in these spaces, they're doing this work, [and] these are some of their identities, but I'm noticing that there are certain particular identities that are being advanced and there are other identities that are not being advanced.

The programs Dr. Monique coordinated required a lot of time beyond the average 40-hour work week. In a given semester, she hosted a program every other day excluding weekends. The sheer amount of weight on her to execute these programs and events manifested in many ways, with one major factor being stress. The stress impacted her physically, mentally, and emotionally. She asserts doing DEI work is not easy.

> …I was absolutely stressed out all the time... My programming calendar ranged from 10 to 15 programs a month and there's only 30 or so days in a month minus

weekends. Technically, let's say they give you 20 days to program and I'm programming basically every other day…I don't think it's possible to not be stressed because on any given day I'm having to send emails, sit in meetings, have impromptu meetings with students, deal with crises, meet with event management, meet with campus partners, meet with student organization leaders, setup for programs, breakdown programs. There's just always so much going on, so many moving pieces, and because that's literally just one part of what I was doing in my role and in my employment with the institution I was stressed all the time. I know that showed up in how I showed up in spaces, how fatigued I was at the end of each week. I'd be fatigued after work. It showed up in my physical being carrying weight differently. So yeah, no, this this role and this work is not easy. It's not stress free. I don't want anyone to have that misconception and because we were doing the work for multiple identities – and often times I was doing that work by myself – it was very much overwhelming. And so, what I tried to do to help with the process was to always engage people with those identities, to assist with the programming. So, contribute your ideas, contribute your time to making these events happen, but at the end of the day everything always fell on me…

Notably, Dr. Monique worked in a center for diversity and inclusion, yet most of the DEI efforts were thrust upon her solely. She was the go-to DEI person but felt that was unfair because she could not be all things to everyone at all times. Simply put, she was not on campus to "rescue" folks through DEI efforts – she was just there to do her job.

> I joked a few years ago with my team about being Superwoman but I'm tired. Like this – it's every day having to come in and show up in a space where they expect *everything* from me. And then, if I'm not around, someone is looking for me. It's just – I never really had any downtime or any peace or any time to really recharge. And so, all of that impacts the mental, the physical, and spiritual. Like it's just not – it just became a very unhealthy work environment.

She put herself through much distress for not only her role in the center, but also because of her passion for serving marginalized students. However, she realized she could not continue to overextend herself to the point of exhaustion; she needed to be in an environment where everyone was working to support marginalized students with the same level of passion and intentionality.

> I think it's just a second layer of the mental fatigue. So, my last semester I had this smaller budget, smaller team, and less support. By the time I got home I was exhausted. So, physically not able to engage with like physical exercise the way that I wanted to or engage with my friends the way that I wanted to because I'm just too tired to do anything else. And so, this last semester was very taxing on me mentally and physically. And [last semester] really helped me to solidify my decision around being more intentional with what I do next. I want to be in a place where I feel like I can thrive personally *and* professionally and not dedicate so much of my time in my life to my job. And so, I learned through this process that yes, this work is important. Yes, this work has value to the students it serves but I am one person, and I cannot pour from an empty cup. So, I have to be in a place where we are better able to support each other, delegate tasks, and think

differently about how we program, so that I'm not at work late three or four nights out of the week.

After her time at Flash U, Dr. Monique determined she in fact is not Superwoman. She concluded serving students should not be done at the expense of her wellbeing. Although she vowed she would be the support for students she never had whilst in her graduate programs, she did not foresee working in an environment that would take so much from her. She was drained mentally, emotionally, physically, and even spiritually. Her spirit was broken; she dedicated three years to Flash U and felt she did not receive her just due in terms of a promotion, opportunities for advancement, skills development, or recognition.

Every Day is a "War"

During her time at Flash U in the diversity and inclusion center, Dr. Monique led programmatic efforts that intentionally centered minoritized identities. She explained it was imperative the center produced programs that educated the campus community about others' identities beyond race and ethnicity because "oftentimes people think Black and white, or male and female, and I just think it's so much deeper than that." She added that for the population of students she served, many of them were fighting "battles" every day. As such, programming for them was challenging as she worked to ensure students felt seen in the programs and were aware of support services and resources available on campus. She worked with students to develop their racial/ethnic/cultural identities, which for some students, was an internal battle as they searched to find themselves. She asserted the work she did was "challenging and life-changing."

…I think working with folks who are basically at war every day, it's just hard. Like, you're trying to create space for them, recognize them, celebrate them, educate them. There are people who are battling with the world, they're battling with their families, they're battling with their peers. I have students who in the fall semester expressed to me that they didn't feel enough of certain identities, so they didn't engage with their peers. So just as an example, I have a student who if you look at her she looks like a white girl. Like,…she walks anywhere at any time of day, you gon think she's a white girl. But she has roots in Argentina, so she is essentially Latin, a Latina. She doesn't speak Spanish with her peers, she does speak Spanish at home with her family. She doesn't engage with any of the Spanish-based or Hispanic-based, Latinx, whatever groups at the institution. She doesn't do any of the programming that's related to those identities. And she, verbatim said to me 'I feel like they're judging me, and I don't feel like I'm enough of this identity to be in these spaces.' And for me, I feel like college is a time where you are supposed to explore, learn more about these identities that you hold, and dive deeper. And so, to feel that you can't do that is a challenge. I feel that you're at war with yourself. And so, working with students who are going through those things and understanding their own identities is hard. I have students who – I had a student whose roommate was on the opposite side of how they felt about the Palestinian and Israel conflict. And so, feeling like you need to change your room in the middle of a semester because you don't feel safe in a space with your roommate – that's tough. These are things that people are not – people who are not dealing with those things, they're not thinking about that,

> they're not thinking about how that impacts your experience as a student. So yeah, it's just this work is hard. Like it's challenging work nine times out of ten and you might get one student who comes back to you and says thank you for your impact, or thank you for showing up for me, or thank you for advocating for me. You might get one student that comes back and does that. Now, I am blessed to have students who thank me on a regular basis…but to have my students thank me and to tell me that I made an impact on them, that is the part that makes it life-changing and that makes it transformative, that makes it worth those late nights and long hours, you know.

Relatedly, when Dr. Monique began working in the center, the mission, vision, goals, and student learning outcomes were not clearly stated. Diversity, equity, and inclusion were not defined. This speaks to another "war." The center was at war with itself – diversity and inclusion were in the name, but the staff did not have a clear understanding of the "what, how, and why" of DEI. Interestingly and unbeknownst to Dr. Monique, at some point the center staff managed a "diversity dictionary" webpage. This further emphasized the disparate knowledge and understanding of the role of the center on campus. This was a challenge for her because there was no strategic vision for the center, something that she believed should be a priority for any HESA office regardless of leadership.

> We didn't really have a definition of what these terms meant. And I say that loosely. Like we have it's so much to unpack. So, when I came into the institution someone randomly sent me an email saying, oh, 'you all have a diversity dictionary on the website and something is outdated, can you update it?' I'm like,

> I don't even know [about this dictionary or] where this link is. I don't know what this dictionary is. It existed before I came on board, but neither of my supervisors had talked to me about this dictionary after I started. So, when someone else brought it to my attention I felt a little bit caught off guard because we weren't actively engaging with this dictionary. So, I had two different graduate assistants work on the dictionary, update it, make new additions to the dictionary, etcetera. And so, it basically covered all the things that people may have questions about, may need to have defined related to identity and oppression and things like that… So, I don't feel like as an office we had a formal definition up until December of 2023. We also didn't have a mission and vision defined for the office. So, I think those things are important and that every office, under whatever leadership there is, should make sure that's a priority for the work and to understand like this is how we're navigating through this space and that we're all on the same page when it comes to defining these terms.

Conversely to the center, when Dr. Monique started working there, she had her own understanding and definitions of DEI. The “I” in DEI specifically is a major part of her ethos as a HESA professional today.

> So, *diversity* to me is just checking off a bunch of boxes. So, saying that you have people who have disabilities, people who identify with Black, Asian, Latin, cultural backgrounds. People who have different religious backgrounds: Jewish, Muslim, Catholic. [It’s] people who have different learning abilities so, folks who are neurodivergent, etc. And so just checking this off to say that in this space we have these different types of people here. I think *equity* means that each of those

people who are in this space have access to the same resources; access and information. They need to know that this is available to them, they can participate, etc. And *inclusion* means that on a regular basis these people who have been brought into this space feel like this space is designed for them, that they are not in a war every day with the institution they chose to enroll in. So, that means that inclusion is the entire campus's job, everybody needs to be engaged in being inclusive... So, for me inclusion means that we have been intentional about how this space works and supports the students as well as faculty and staff on a daily basis. That is not something we think about after the fact – oh, our institution's been built for 100 plus years and we're just now updating the buildings. Or we're just now updating policies, having bathrooms that students can go into and feel safe, having braille on door signs, like all these things that people are *not* thinking about on a regular basis, that people who have majority identities are not thinking about, and then therefore not changing anything to make the campus more inclusive. Inclusion is a *big deal.* It can make someone's life way easier to navigate when we are actively being inclusive and that shows up in so many different ways. So, inclusion *is* the work…

Dr. Monique also highlighted the importance of having clear definitions of DEI because these definitions would have guided the work the center's staff produced and ensured everyone understood how these definitions should be demonstrated across all the work the center implemented. Furthermore, for Dr. Monique, having these definitions and applying them to their work as a collective in the center would have helped advance their efforts in supporting students in more meaningful ways. She explained that because

the students she worked with were constantly "in battle," the center served as a refuge from the battlefield. Additionally, the center was also a space that supported student retention, engagement, and students' leadership development.

> So, I think that cultural centers are intended to provide a safe space for Students of Color or marginalized backgrounds. I think that cultural centers are to help with increasing enrollment of Students of Color or marginalized backgrounds. Oftentimes they're [cultural centers] involved in some admissions [or] orientation. I think another part of the task is to help with the retention of these students from year to year. And I think to bring resources to the students in an organized or intentional way. And then, because these spaces are typically under student affairs and not academic affairs, there's some level of student engagement, leadership development, or skill development that will happen as a result of being engaged with these spaces. I think cultural centers kind of check off the DEI box for white schools. And hopefully, you know, depending on the institution, the right people are in in the spaces so that they're being intentional about the learning outcomes and the way that they achieve that with students and assessing their work overtime and building collaborative relationships across the campus to engage everybody in this work.

She added that the cultural centers should not be the only respite from the battlefield. DEI work and the retention of Students of Color and students from marginalized backgrounds should be supported by *every* office, unit, department, staff member, faculty, administration – everyone – within higher education institutions.

> …I believe this is true of DEI work and cultural spaces: it's not just on the responsibility of the designated space, it's everyone at the institution's responsibility to be engaged in supporting and retaining Students of Color and marginalized backgrounds. Like, it can't just be the cultural center's job to do the work. All these teams and efforts need to be in sync; we need to be synchronized in our efforts so that we can have the biggest impact. And I feel like sometimes cultural centers can operate in silos and that's not truly beneficial to the student experience.

In addition, a third "war" was occurring with Flash U as an institution.. On one end, the institution proclaimed it was committed to the principles of DEI, but on the other the institution actively sustained systemic barriers that worked against DEI efforts. She detailed one such barrier was the varied treatment for internal campus units hosting programs on campus.

> …One of the things I valued about my time [at Flash U] is that I was able to create programming that became tradition, that have become sustainable, right? So, they can continue to happen year to year. And I tried my very best to transition my programming over so that it can continue to happen now that I'm gone. I will say, one of the things that I really think students appreciated [was] one of the events we hosted in 2022. I hosted a program and essentially it was just three Black owned food trucks on campus and people literally stood in line for hours to get this food. And it wasn't free; they had to pay for it… In 2023, we hosted the program again, but we made it a block party. So, not only did we have the Black owned food trucks, but we also had Black vendors, we had Black

> vendors outside, we had a Black student deejay, we had Black student talent, and we made it into…like a festival; like, a little event to come to and to engage with versus just coming to get food and leaving. And so, that event is hard… I just had the meeting in December to transition this program for them to prepare for February; it's a Black History Month program, we're supporting all Black owned businesses and Black people. We're elevating people and their identities during the month that they're supposed to be celebrated, and I get challenges from partners on campus about oh, you can't do this here, it's gonna cost this much money to do this, and we're gonna have to charge you this much money for that.

At Flash U, Dr. Monique posited that there were battles on two fronts occurring simultaneously that shaped the institution's culture and climate. The first battle was with her students that unfolded in two ways: internal and external. Internally, some students were struggling to find themselves with regard to their racial/ethnic/cultural identity development. She explained that working with students that are learning to define and understand their identities for themselves is "hard." The second battle students encountered was external to them as they encountered difficult or hostile campus environments. The story she shared about the student and their roommate with opposing views on Palestine and Iseral is a salient illustration of this.

The second battle Dr. Monique discussed occurred within the diversity and inclusion center. The center's leadership and by extension the university's leadership did not have a strategic vision for the center. There were no clearly identified goals, vision, mission, nor working definitions of terms and concepts that could have served as the cornerstone for the work produced by the staff. Put another way, Dr. Monique argued that

it was important to have those elements clearly defined to ensure all staff members understood and demonstrated DEI principles to advance the work of the center.

The third battle concerned Flash U. The institution's DEI in practice did align with the DEI in theory. This means that the language and actions associated with DEI by the institution did match what they proposed DEI would be on campus. Dr. Monique spoke to this when she discussed how the center – a space that provided cultural programs for the campus – did not receive the same treatment as other internal campus departments such as advancement or commencement. These "wars" also illustrated how the university reinforced the notion that Dr. Monique or other DEI folks in the center be the campus' "Superwoman" and "rescue" folks through the perilous "battlefield" of DEI work.

DEI Efforts are Just "Band-Aids"

Working in a DEI designated space confirmed that cultural centers and related offices are covers for white institutions, according to Dr. Monique. These spaces "check the DEI box" for PWIs but fail to address systemic issues that signaled the need for DEI spaces and initiatives. This harkens back to the establishment of cultural centers which were borne out of protests led by Black students on predominantly white campuses, as discussed in chapter two.

> …I think that it's important to recognize that these spaces [cultural centers] are created because of historical boundaries and barriers to access into these spaces. And then the issue is that what people really should be doing is tearing down the systems that exist that continue to be barriers to access instead of creating a space that they think is that is dedicated to these identities that will solve all the issues,

> when really, that's not the case. So, on the one hand, yes, having these centers are important to the success of the students who are enrolling at these institutions but beyond this space, a couple of employees, and some programs, the systems that these institutions operate within still cause harm – emotional, physical, mental, [and] financial trauma to students on a regular basis. So, in my opinion, I think cultural centers are a Band-Aid to a problem. They're not actually resolving the problem. And I think also, for institutions, that if they do have cultural centers being intentional about what the centers are called, where the centers are located, and the space that is allocated to each center is important… So, I just think that there's a lot of work to still be done, there's a lot of things that still need to be addressed within higher education and especially at institutions that are 200 years old plus. There's a lot of things that still are just happening and no one is taking that into account. And so, they're like, oh, let's erect this cultural center and that will take care of these students, but that's not the whole story.

Dr. Monique also explained that if DEI efforts were only in place because a law mandated it within higher education, colleges and universities were not truly committed to equity and inclusion.

> So, let's say, for example, I'm at an institution that is historically white, and the laws came down to basically undo affirmative action, right? And so, affirmative action, at least my very basic understanding of affirmative action, is to basically say that we're giving opportunities to People of Color, specifically Black people, to come into a space, right? Whether that's on an academic level or professional level. If the institution then says because this is the national mandate that we're no

> longer allowed to enforce this law and they take it away [and] if the institution was only doing certain things because it was mandated by the law, right, then, these are just Band-Aids over an issue. But if the people who are actually in place to *change* the structures and policies and procedures of the institution *believe* in equity and inclusion then they don't need that law to tell them what to do. The practices will show up. So, for example, where do we go to recruit students for the institution? Where do we go to recruit faculty for the institution? Does the faculty reflect the student identities that are on campus, right? When you think about your employees, are the folks that are in the cultural center representative of the students you're trying to serve?

She asserted budget lines for DEI efforts also highlight institutions' commitment to these efforts. How are funds allocated to DEI efforts and are these budget lines *sustained* from year to year?

> When you think about the financial piece, are the cultural centers able to have enough funding to do the programming or do they have to collaborate to get more funds to do programs, right? Is the money where your mouth is really my biggest concern with white institutions. It's like you're saying you want these places to be diverse, you want to have these students here but where is the funding to support the resources that are being developed for these students… And so, when you think about like the actual programmatic pieces in my most recent role, I went from having a $100,000 budget in my second year to having a $15,000 budget because of restructuring; $15,000 is not enough to program for a whole school year. It's actually impossible especially when you think about the way that the

> institution charges departments to use spaces, right? If you think about how much it costs to cater, think about how much it costs to bring entertainment – those things add up. So, if there's not enough funding dedicated to this area, if the right people are not in place, if the way that we even bring the students into the school, if we're not thinking about all of those things, you're just putting a Band-Aid to say, hey, we *want* to make you feel comfortable here, but we're not *doing* anything to actually make you feel comfortable here.

As an example of Dr. Monique's Band-Aid theory in action was how the center and Flash U approached charged or distressing DEI related incidents. She said there were no was no "real" effort to mitigate issues that negatively impacted the campus community, particularly issues that impacted marginalized communities. She posited that the institution's way of addressing these issues was to release statements to the campus; she felt, however, that these statements did not help the campus or affected community in any way.

> I think the only thing that we actually did, like thinking about it from a political standpoint, the only thing that we did was release statements on behalf of the office/institution. So, my supervisor would write these long winded statements to address whatever issues were happening racially, faith based, gender and sexuality based. These statements that we would publish on our website I would put in our newsletter and then also add to our social media and that was gist of it. The hard part about that was he would write the statement, [then] he would ask the team to proofread [and] offer any suggestions, and then this statement would be the statement for the university as opposed to our office and the chancellor

> working together to write a statement. Oftentimes the chancellor would share something out and it would be completely tone-deaf to the group that he was supposed to be addressing. So, it was just again, within the systems of a white institution there are not *real* efforts to address issues. So, I feel like the statements were like this is the protocol for addressing these issues.

Dr. Monique also discussed a time when the institution addressed a racially charged incident. Some students and community members did not receive the institution's response well. They felt excluded from the process and also felt the institution did not do well with explicitly making it known that the incident was not acceptable in the Flash U community. This further exemplified Dr. Monique's sentiments of DEI spaces to being "Band-Aids."

> …So, during the pandemic a Black mural was put up in our underpass. So, the underpass is an area where students typically have an opportunity to paint and advertise for their upcoming programs, but because everybody was off campus that space was not being activated. So, some Black muralists were brought in to paint this area and after maybe a year and a half of me being in the role…a white supremacy group defaced the mural. And students were – Black students were very upset about it…. We started to have conversations with my team with some students about the incident. But what we ended up doing – which received a lot of negative feedback – was essentially my team, professional staff, and some student leaders, went out to the mural and we just painted over the entire mural. And so basically, it was gone after that point… But there wasn't a press release or any type of statement addressing the issue. The students didn't feel like they really did

> a good job of announcing what happened to the people who did it because it was – the area is camera recorded like security and stuff is in place; so, they were able to figure out who did it. They shared the young man's image online, tracked him back to this white supremacy group, but no consequences of his actions happened to this day, as far as I know. The student body, the Black students, were very upset because they felt like we again put a 'Band-Aid' on this and covered up the mural; we didn't really talk to students about what they wanted. They feel like we didn't – even though we technically did – include students in that process and they felt like we didn't do a good job of bringing them justice essentially... And you know, faculty and staff started to kind of hear the rumblings of when students are upset. And so, even that was brought to my attention when they're like, what's going on? What happened? You know? Blah blah. So, those types of things, that particular incident, I would say was a very specific example of how the institution just doesn't do a good job of responding to incidents around DEI and then actually supporting the students in a way that they still feel safe after an incident has occurred.

Furthermore, Dr. Monique also discussed another side of DEI work: policy. Policies have been implemented at the federal, state, and institutional level to address inequities within higher education. However, now some states have introduced and/or passed bills that aim to dismantle DEI efforts in higher education. DEI initiatives were created to ensure institutions of higher education were accessible, inclusive, and welcoming for groups who were historically excluded from the HE experience. Dr. Monique underscored this type of work must be done in good faith. She argued that to

make institutions more inclusive, people in decision-making positions need to*" actually create change"* and not just provide statements of support. This work must be done through actions.

> So, I think the tough part is oftentimes the people who are making these decisions that impacts institutions of higher education haven't worked in college environments, [they] don't know what's really going on, and this is not a priority for them. And we truly need more higher ed policy people in these places to be a voice to represent students and their needs as well as institutions, faculty, and staff because we're impacted by the decisions that they make as well. So, I say all that to say when these bills are being proposed, when the conversations are being had, when the president or chancellor [of an] institution sends out emails to address these types of things, it definitely keeps it on the radar and at the forefront of the work we're doing. So, there's a reminder that the cultural centers are needed and that we're just constantly under attack. Reducing funding or changing names or trying to find loopholes, I think a lot of institutions across the country are trying to accommodate bills that have been passed, even though Flash U hasn't necessarily been impacted directly by anything being passed yet… There's a new office at Flash U for [equity affairs] and that space is supposed to, in my mind, what I would want that space to do is to be resource for faculty and staff to get support when they don't feel supported by their supervisors or their peers, if they feel harassed or discriminated against, or whatever it might be, but they are moving so politically that nothing is really being done. It's just for namesake to have this space available for folks. So, I just think people do a lot of things to say

> that they're doing it and they're not actually creating change or thinking about the long-term impacts for students.

Here, Dr. Monique laid bare feelings about DEI as an institutional practice in higher education. For her, yes, cultural centers and DEI efforts more broadly are important spaces resources for students. Dr. Monique argued that institutions be intentional about the "why, when, where, and how" DEI efforts are developed and ensure they are sustained. Moreover, these efforts requires action; without concerted actions towards these efforts, they serve as "Band-Aids" covering larger systemic issues.

Navigating Barriers Facing DEI Efforts

The diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at Flash U were presented as an integral part of the university's mission to develop students for a global and diverse society. This mission was expanded in the summer of 2023 as the center underwent a restructuring. The center is now an umbrella unit with five functional areas dedicated to DEI work. The functional areas range from cross-cultural engagement, international student success, interfaith and spiritual affairs, among other units. The center's restructuring was done to create a centralized location for resources to better support students from various backgrounds and to help students engage with their own and other's identities and cultures. Conversely, however, Dr. Monique said the institution did not adhere to its stated commitment to DEI. She detailed that while she was planning programs, she encountered pushback due to systematic institutional barriers and barriers within her center. She also felt the pushback was more blatant when she was planning programs for Black people.

> Twice in the last three years there was an event that undergraduate students wanted to host during the new student orientation weekend… but the office that's over new student orientation programs, basically, was like we already planned this out, it's too late to add anything, the communication has already gone out to the parents. So, I worked with the students to say okay, well I know y'all are very passionate about this event happening, we'll just put it in the first week of classes and then we will put it under my department's name. So, that particular program was specific to Black students and their identities, and I advised the student organization that was trying to host it. So, it just made sense for me to show up for them and stand in the gap and so we did move forward hosting the program but the pushback we received was twofold. One from the office that hosts the new student orientation because they didn't want any additional programming happening during that week. And then, also within my office, the issue was that if we host this program for Black students, we're gonna have to host it for every student identity…

Another institutional barrier she faced was Flash U's lack of equipment for large events such as tables and chairs. Dr. Monique outsourced materials which inflated the cost of her events. She noted this system was not ideal for the center nor the populations they served, many of which had limited financial resources.

> One of the hardest things on this particular campus is that they don't have a – they don't have their own, I'll call it a warehouse. They don't have their own like storage space for tables, chairs, and linens. You have to book an external vendor to come and do that. That can cost up to $500 to have enough seating, right? So,

> to provide a space that has to be we have to get permits from the city and the county to block off the street. You gotta have trucks that have a certain level of insurance. So, if it's a small-owned business, right, like how are they supposed to reach those minimums? You have a system within the dining services on campus – where they do this on a regular basis – they bring food trucks on campus but to a different part of the campus and they allow students to use their [campus bucks], so basically, like their meal plans to cover their food, but wanna give me a challenge around setting that process up with the vendors. Then, you gotta coordinate with all the vendors to come on campus to set up tables, and the talent, and the deejay, and all the things, right? So, there's so many moving parts to this [food truck] event…So, for me that is one of the programs I'm most proud of, but it is one of the hardest things to pull off…

In addition, with regard to state policy, Dr. Monique did not believe the center was prepared to address legislation that might impact the center. The staff discussed policies in staff meetings, sometimes created programming around the policies being introduced to educate the campus community, or they would send out communication about the matter. Yet, Dr. Monique felt this process was not proactive; she believed the center could have done more to be better prepared to respond to legislative action.

> … I don't believe that we were doing a fantastic job really at addressing things as they were coming down. One of the things that I think about for myself as I continue on my career trajectory, is I want to implement at the start of every staff meeting, reviewing current articles and policies that are impacting students at the institution I would be at because I feel like we can get so busy within the work

> and everything that's going on that we're not paying attention to what's happening around us, and that can come back and bite us in the butt. So, I just think it's important for student affairs practitioners to also be scholar- practitioners. So, we need to be aware of what's happening, what is being documented, researched, and presented, so we know what's going on, what the trends are, what changes are coming down, so we can better anticipate and be proactive to resolve some issues as opposed to being completely reactive. For example, like what happened with affirmative action. It came down, okay here's what we're gonna do versus if people might have been paying attention to this sooner, we could have already put some things in place to say that this doesn't even matter that they're about to change this. We already know how we want to make sure we're recruiting and retaining Students of Color, students from marginalized backgrounds. We would be better prepared to handle these things if we were anticipating it versus waiting for things to happen.

In this light, Dr. Monique shared a time when the center addressed how to support their queer and trans population after a bill passed that affected their access to healthcare. During this time, the center staff discussed how they could share resources with students that would help them feel safe and retain them at the institution. This was important because the center had recently created an office for LGBTQIA+ affairs. Therefore, it was crucial the center and the LGBTQIA+ office shared information and resources with students that could help them make informed and safe decisions about their healthcare needs.

> …There is a bill that was passed around healthcare for queer and trans folks. And in my center we also serve our queer and trans student population…So, one of the things that we constantly were talking about…[were] the bills that were being passed; the way that it was impacting students; the news articles are being released; the lack of access to healthcare; how parents and families are responding to certain things; and how the students are being treated in the state. Students wanted to leave the institution because they weren't feeling safe in the state. So, that really does have an impact on the centers because we typically are very close to the students that we're serving and then if we build [a] relationship with someone and we find out they're considering having to leave the institution, now we have to think about a different set of resources to try to keep the student there, try to support the student through this time…And so, sometimes they go to college, and that is their only safe space to be and so, how do we continue to support them? And so, oftentimes I think, especially, if we think about affirmative action or "diversity statements," I feel like a lot of times people think Black and white and they're just thinking about race but there are so many other pieces of diversity that people are not thinking about on a regular basis and sexuality and gender expression is a part of that.

Institutional barriers were challenging for Dr. Monique's work. The barriers she faced to implement DEI programs mostly stemmed from a decreased budget, limited staff, and systems within Flash U that made it difficult, at times, to access the same resources as other units within the institution. She also noted how political discourse surrounding DEI efforts and laws related to access for minoritized groups informed her

work in the center. For example, queer and trans students were impacted by a healthcare bill that passed in her state. The center's staff discussed ways they could better support the trans and queer community on campus by sharing information and resources with them as they navigated how to access inclusive and affirming healthcare. Dr. Monique also expressed that universal access is a part of DEI work, and she was intentional about ensuring that the programs she hosted were accessible to all.

DEI is Just a "Buzzword:" A Counterstory – End

The umbrella HESA unit of diversity, equity, and inclusion is an area that Dr. Monique did not seek. The work she did with first-generation and Students of Color prior to working at Flash U was her doing what she loved; this was not something she understood as DEI work. She admitted getting hired in the center was fortuitous because her supervisor from her consultant position "spoke highly" of her and encouraged her to apply. She made it through the interview process and was offered the position. She also fiercely proclaimed she does not want to work in a DEI role again.

> I actually didn't want to work in DEI. I still don't want to work in DEI. It's interesting because now that I'm job searching publicly and people are aware that I've left my position, everyone keeps trying to offer me other positions in DEI. I don't want to do this work. This is very taxing and exhausting work for Black people, specifically Black women. And this is not something that I woke up one day and I was like ooh, this is what I want to do. So, I just want to be very clear that this was not my intention and it's still not my intention…It's nothing that I wanted to do, and this is my first role in a 'diversity and inclusion center'... So yeah, this wasn't something that I pursued… I just really think that this work is –

> diversity and inclusion should be ingrained into all areas of the institution. It shouldn't be this title of one office. So, when I think about DEI work it's not – I just feel like the way that higher education approaches it is just weird. And it really just needs to be integrated into everything that we're doing. So, when we look at campus life, when we look at fraternities and sororities, we look at residential life, we look at career services – like, DEI work should just be in everything that everyone's doing all the time. It's not something that this one office needs to highlight and educate people around.

Importantly, Dr. Monique said she has been upholding the principles of DEI since she started working in HESA as a paraprofessional in summer bridge programs during her undergraduate studies. "I was very passionate about that because I was working with first-gen, low income students, and Students of Color and helping them to navigate finding access into higher education." Additionally, although she does not want to work in DEI designated spaces again, she acknowledged any work she does will encompass the principles of DEI because they are a part of her ethics as a HESA professional.

> I'm not searching for DEI roles. I don't want to do that work anymore. Now, and I say that jokingly or loosely; I don't want to do 'DEI' titled work, right, but I believe that everything that I do on a college campus is infused with DEI principles and values and access for students. So, for example, if I'm applying to be the director of student engagement at HBCU they might have a majority of Black students, but Black people are not monolithic, right? So, every student is going to have a different lived experience, different academic and personal needs to be successful. So, if I have a student who has a disability, if I have a student

> who is queer, if I have a student who's international, they're gonna have different experiences that are going to need to be supported. And I would still use my DEI lens to do that work, but I'm not coming into a space where the state is trying to take away my job.

Additionally, in every space she occupied at Flash U, she was lauded as the "DEI expert." Her experiences clashed with the institution's stated aims of fostering an equitable and inclusive campus. She discussed how being one of the only DEI experts on campus was challenging, in part, because she produced programs and workshops under the banner of DEI, but she also needed support as a staff member. Dr. Monique noted faculty/staff needs were different and required specified support for their education around DEI topics. This further cemented her belief that DEI work should be a part of every facet of an institution and not be relegated to one person or a specific space on campus.

> I guess I'll speak to this experience because my workshops are so popular and really relatable. I had a lot of faculty and staff that also wanted to show up in my workshops, the programs, [and] events, too. I've always had this caveat that while we are primarily student-facing everybody is welcome to join us, but really the faculty and staff should have their own workshops and events that they can go to and feel supported and educated, but the institution is not providing that. And so, one of the things that would be nice is to not be the expert in the room all the time. There should be other people that are able to provide these same resources to me, to edify me as an employee. And so, I feel like that is something that was challenging to always be considered the expert in the room, to have to sit on every

> panel, be a part of every committee, to show up in every space, to speak on these topics – like that is exhausting! I don't wish that on anybody, but I don't think that is really gonna change anytime soon for folks who work in [diversity and inclusion centers].

Moreover, the political discourse around DEI intensified feelings of resentment towards DEI work for Dr. Monique. As someone who was doing this work from a position of passion for working with marginalized communities and as someone who also holds marginalized identities – it was like she was holding a mirror while doing her work which reflected some of the most taxing experiences of marginalized communities. She detailed this work magnified feelings of being “burned through.”

> …So, I think DEI work is exhausting. I think, showing up every day with the identities that I hold and then doing the work for the identities that I reflect is difficult. And then because of the way that my center was set up – I didn't only hold programming or engage students who are Black – I engaged students who are Latinx, Asian American, queer, international, students with disabilities, Indigenous identities, etcetera, etcetera. And so, because of all of those things, like, it becomes very challenging to show up every day when everything is exhausting and everything is happening at the same time. So, personally one of the things that I just recently learned at a conference is changing the way that we address the language of burnout. And I just don't believe that professionals are burnt out because I feel like I was still showing up every day for work, and I was still doing the best in my work – but I was being burned through. I held a lot of roles in addition to what I was hired to do, and I showed up in a lot of spaces

> trying to be an advocate for students and to really be a voice in in a space where they're not at the table. And so, my feeling towards this work is that I was beginning to resent taking the job because it was just becoming more than I wanted to be in a negative way. In addition to the positive things, I was able to do, I was not being rewarded and recognized for all of the work that I was doing. And so, that was making me less and less interested in continuing to stay in the role, in that office, at that institution, in this city, and state. All of those layers make me very ready to get the hell outta here. So, my feelings are very much I'm done with this and I'm moving on.

Furthermore, to reiterate, Flash U is a private, four-year institution, therefore state anti-DEI policies that are aimed at public institutions may not have the exact ramifications at Flash U. In this light, Dr. Monique shared the campus politics at Flash U were a crucial element to consider with regard to how politics shape the work of cultural centers. In her experience, the implications of campus politics play more of a role in how cultural centers are funded and perceived on campus than state policies.

> …So, people who want to be politicians, like that piece of it, is separate from the politics that happen on a college campus. So, in addition to laws or legal changes, right, there are things that people have to do to appease donors, and those politics, I think, impact cultural centers. For example, [regarding the office restricting,] the areas that were created, the names of those areas all are to make sure that when we go to advancement, when we go to donors, when we talk to the vice president of student affairs, and the president [of the] institution– how do we sell this to people to wanna put funding towards this, right? And so, what positions are in

> place? What are the titles of those positions? The title of all the areas within the office, to me, I just think that is an additional headache, honestly that folks in these spaces have to go through to make sure things are palatable to people who are they are trying to receive funding [from]. Now, I am not rich by any means, and I can't give Flash U hundreds of thousands of dollars to be like 'I want you all to build this area out.' So, you know, it's a bit of a song and dance to try to make other people want to give their dollars to this area. So, those are the processes that I think impacts the area more so than legal politics that are happening outside of the institution. But just seeing things – how information is filtered from senior leadership down, how information or the feedback is filtered back up, I just think are things that people may or may not be thinking about, but it definitely impacts the work and how you show up because it gets tiring trying to explain that this doesn't work, this doesn't make sense, and no one is listening to you say that.

Dr. Monique posited that institutional politics and the "song and dance" of appealing and acquiescing to donors is a form of politics more HESA professionals should be attuned to on their campuses. In understanding the anti-DEI discourse and policies through the perspective of someone who worked in a private institution, she argued campus politics, not necessarily public higher education policy, determines how a unit or department is funded among other components. She noted this process may be a "headache" for staff in specialized HESA units who often have to find ways to "prove" their value to institutions that purport to be in support of equity focused initiatives.

Synopsis

"I identify as a young Black woman in every space that I enter." While all of Dr. Monique's identities – Caribbean American (first generation born in the US), member of a historically Black sorority, world traveler, first-generation student, and as a person raised in a single parent household are important – her Black woman identity is a large part of how she shows up in the world. Her time in the diversity and inclusion center taught her much about her own identities and how to champion others' identities through her work.

Moreover, although Dr. Monique does not want to work in a DEI designated space again, she has embraced her DEI identity and will implement DEI principles in her daily practice as a HESA scholar-practitioner. She explained she has a "true gift and a calling to serve Black students." Dr. Monique also stands on the shoulders of the HESA professionals who poured into her and is assured in how she wants to show up and support students. Wherever her HESA journey takes her next, she will do her best to help make students' higher education experiences inclusive and affirming.

> So, I just feel like the center has the ability to create opportunity for folks to engage and I think that's really important to take advantage of that. I think one of the things that I also was able to leverage was the fact that we were the 'diversity space.' So, if I wanted to have a Black owned business cater or a Latinx business cater, I could do that, even though technically, we're supposed to use the on campus catering services in our premier spaces. I used I call it the 'diversity card' instead of the 'Black card,' but being able to leverage that and to support local Black, Black-owned, or small-owned businesses, or culturally-owned businesses

is really important. So, the center has a lot of ways that it can show up for the students, it can show up for faculty and staff, it can show up for the community. Hopefully, people will continue to prioritize that now that I'm gone.

Erik

Erik is a higher education (HE) professional with 16 years of experience. He identifies as a Black, cisgender, first-generation student, male, and natural born citizen to the United States. He subscribes to the "Christian theology, more specifically Baptist – Missionary Baptist to be even more specific." In his career, he has worked in residence life and housing, diversity and inclusion, admissions, and enrollment management at three private historically Black colleges and universities and two predominantly white institutions all of which were/are located in red or politically conservative states across. He is currently the director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Broadview State University and a doctoral candidate. He is expected to graduate in May 2024. Since graduating with his bachelor's degree, Erik has been on a journey towards becoming a steward of the higher education student affairs (HESA) profession and aims to be a part of "leading the way" and helping to "mold these young people so they can be the change agents of the next generation and take their rightful place in this global society."

A Helping Profession: Pathway to Higher Education and Student Affairs – Beginning

During his time as an undergraduate student working towards a Bachelor of Public Administration, Erik was also employed in the admissions office as a student ambassador. It was here that he was exposed to HESA as a career path after having conversations with his mentor's supervisor – the vice president of student affairs. He proclaimed to the VPSA "I could do this full-time. What is this called where you get to help students all the time, right? What kind of career is this?" He was "enamored with" the idea of working in HESA. The VPSA encouraged Erik to pursue graduate school and

shared suggestions of what programs to consider. Although Erik did not apply to any of the programs the vice president suggested, he did enroll in a higher education graduate program. Upon graduating with his Master of Science in Higher Education Administration, Erik was approached by a former colleague to apply for a job in her office.

> One of the ladies that I met in the admissions office, she was an admissions counselor, and she ended up becoming a director of admissions at a small private school. And she said 'hey, I have a job down here for you.' And I served as the admin assistant for the Office of Admissions there. And so, I started my career there and was there for four and a half years.

After his time in the admissions office, he worked predominantly in housing and residence life in the Midwest and South. During this period, from 2013-2022, he also had his first diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) role at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwest.

> So, I was a program coordinator with a program called The Retreat [pseudonym] in an office which provided resources, academic tutoring, and professional and personal development opportunities for first-generation college students and Students of Color on our campus – both domestic and international minorities on the campus at that institution. I was there for four and a half years, and, you know, the time there was just really well spent. It allowed me not only to develop professionally, but also personally, right? I was able to grow my leadership skills and grow my critical thinking, my program management and event planning skills. And also, being able to develop my presentation skills. My office worker

> was responsible for many of the diversity presentations that were provided across campus for faculty, students, and staff, and then even some community organizations. And over the course of the four years, I estimate probably over 125 presentations given. So, it allowed me to really hone in and perfect my public speaking craft. And that's also led to another side hustle. Probably one of the best experiences of my career. And people always ask, you know, what was it like working out there? Oh my gosh, are there any Black people out there? I had a t-shirt made – so yes, there are Black people there. But it was really you know, the first few months were a little rough because that was the first place that I moved where I didn't know anybody, but I was able to thrive in that atmosphere and just grow myself while I was growing students. So, amazing opportunity.

Interestingly, his experience in a DEI space, The Retreat, was not a deliberate job. Erik did not set out to become a DEI professional, he wanted to "try something different" and work in a functional area in which he had no experience, but he acknowledged his interest in this area was driven by his desire to see Black and Brown students succeed.

> …I worked in enrollment management, I worked in residence life and housing, and I just wanted to try a different functional area, right? I wanted to see the Black and Brown kids on these predominantly white campuses have the same opportunities as the majority students. So, not necessarily like a vivid story, or one thing like, oh,… you should be a DEI professional…I wanted to step outside my comfort zone cause I had never worked in the area…

Working in The Retreat underscored his passion for helping students, particularly Black and Brown students. In reflecting on his own experiences in college as a first-generation

Black male student, Erik noted that once he learned about careers in HESA as a pathway to helping students, he wanted to work in spaces that would help students thrive.

> But working with college students allows me the opportunity to share a bit of my experiences, right, in hopes that they can avoid some of the pitfalls and the challenges and the struggles that I had as an undergrad student, as a first-generation undergrad student, right?

Importantly, when Erik began his role in The Retreat, his desire to help students intensified as he was in a space that catered to minoritized students. He also appreciated the program's mission to help with student success. As such, Erik's passion coupled with The Retreat's mission came together harmoniously and created a space where support for minoritized students was center stage. He explained student success can be demonstrated through academics, leadership, service, civic engagement, and personal and professional growth, harkening back to his sentiments of preparing the next generation of change agents for an increasingly global society.

> ...I wanna see them represented at the, you know, academic excellence reception thrown by the president, right? I mean, they're there, but it's very few of them right? Like, if it's 500, it's only 25 Black and Brown students, right? And I know I wanna see them be recognized for their great work in the classroom. Even outside of the classroom, that social success, right? I wanna see you honored for your leadership skills, your community service involvement, your fundraising that you did to help a nonprofit. I wanna see them honored and appreciated in the same way as majority students. That's what success looks like to me. I wanna see them successful as they transition from college student to [the] professional world or

> corporate life, or even to grad school. I wanna see them successful in their thinking right, being able to go from one plane to the next plane with no difficulty. That's what success looks like to me.

"Passion Work:" For the Love of HESA

Broadview State University (BSU) is a public, four-year research institution offering bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. The institution is located in the southeast. BSU has various campuses with each offering "distinct feels." Each campus serves diverse communities – "you have the rural experience… you have the urban campus feel… and then you have a military feel." The student population is approximately 26,000 and just over one third of the student population identifies as Students of Color – this also includes those who identify as Hispanic (of any race).

Erik has served in the capacity of director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs for one year. His primary responsibilities are administrative and supervisory oversight of the office. He prepares and manages the office's budget and oversees marketing and branding. Erik has direct reports which include assistant directors and an administrative assistant. His indirect reports include program coordinators, graduate assistants, and student workers.

The office staff provides DEI programming across multiple campuses. "Our primary goal is to facilitate programing, discussions around topics of multiculturalism, interculturalism, and to promote cultural heritage celebrations." The assistant directors, program coordinators, and graduate assistants lead the programming and implementation efforts associated with the office's student success initiatives, cultural heritage programming, and DEI presentations. The staff also serves as a resource for students who

may need additional support on campus; therefore, the staff also connects students with other campus resources that may be able to better assist them by answering questions or concerns that are outside of the scope of work of the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

Additionally, while Erik's role as director does not explicitly include the responsibilities of programming, he made it clear he wants to lead by example and show his staff that he is open to doing anything to ensure students and his staff have great experiences when they engage with anything the office produces.

> …I know this is not everybody's testimony, right, but I'm a very active director. And I always tell my staff, I wouldn't ask you to do anything I wouldn't do myself, okay. So, for instance we had our first Black History Month kick-off last week. And my coordinator was saying that he had a 15 to 20 minute block; he had no presentation, no entertainment, no nothing. People weren't responding. I said 'okay, I gotcha.' So, I'm a line dance instructor, soul line dancing [to be exact]. So, you know what let's go! I can do two or three dances to take up 15-20 minutes of your time. Problem solved, right? I'm gonna get in and help. I'm lifting tables, putting up chairs, helping with décor – that's what a leader does, right? Yes, you get paid to do all this stuff but I'm gonna jump in to help you, too. I want you to understand that I'm not above, you know, helping.

Erik also explained that being a HESA professional requires one to do it for the love of it. "I call it passion work. It's advocacy. You know, creating spaces to amplify voices that have historically been underrepresented and muted. It's passion work. It's ministry, you know. Caring for those who typically are forgotten, looked over, and underserved." He thinks that to do this work, one must be called to do it; one must enter

the field of HESA wanting to "uplift" and help others because this work is oftentimes taxing on the mind, body, and spirit.

> You have to have a really deep love to do this kind of work because it can be draining mentally, physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. This has to be something that you were just completely drawn to, and that's the uplift of others, right? And that's what my life is drawn to. I think as a brother, as a friend, as a Christian, you know, you want to extend the love of Christ to other people and not even just like, you know, church work, right? But you want to extend that love to people who are typically discarded or not really supported. And so, you have to have a passion for that work even when the people, when they don't understand, right? Even when times are dark or you know, when politicians pass legislation or when funding is cut. You still have to make a way. I call it making a Moses way. Sometimes you have to work miracles with nothing. Passion work. Deep love. Appreciation for.

Another way in which Erik's passion for his work was highlighted is through his excitement to go to work every day. As the director of the office, he believes every day is an opportunity to grow, learn, and share his culture and learn from others' cultures. The office is not only a space for students to engage with the programs, but it is also a space for education and community building.

> It's a party every day. I come to work, and I enjoy what I do, right? I don't have to sit in the parking lot before I get here and go, here we go again. Every day is different. Every day allows me the opportunity, not only impact students' lives, but it offers me the chance to grow my person, to grow my mindset, to grow my

> worldview on what life looks like for you. It allows me the opportunity to enhance my professional staff, to grow with them as professionals and as people. To grow my student workers, my grad assistants. It's a party every day I can come to work, and we can laugh, and we can joke. You know, there have been days we just sat here and cut up some days, right? Where the days were just hard and I'm like 'y'all let's just [come] into our little lobby. Let's just, let's just talk for a little bit." Because sometimes you can, as a as a leader, you know, everybody don't have the gift, right? But sometimes that discernment kicks in and it's like, you know what, the people just need to have a chat, they just need to just take a breather. And you be like what? Tell em' to do what? Okay, all right Big Jesus. 'Y'all come on and let's talk a little bit.' And they be like you know 'I really needed this.' And I'm like, glad I was obedient…Every day is a joyous moment, right, because I have the privilege and the pleasure of serving people.

Moreover, Erik's passion work is bolstered by his office's role on the campus. At BSU, the Office of Multicultural Affairs is an integral part of student life. He explained the office is a place where students or anyone who engages with the office can come and be themselves, wholly. He believes individuals who engage with the office are empowered and emboldened to "be who you are" and grow in their thinking and understanding of the world outside of themselves.

> I would say it's a hub of activity, like it's the place to be. It's the place to be. A place when you walk through the door, you don't have to put on any airs, you can take that mask that you have to put on to the world every day, you can take that mask off, and you can be yourself when you walk through the doors. You know,

> I'm not looking at just number of 4473837, I'm looking at you as Tika, John, Mike, Man Man, or whatever you want to be called. That's how I'm looking at you as, right? You don't have to put on, you know, you could take that protective guard [down] because you're in a safe space. I know, safe space, it has different meanings for different people, but this is a safe space. No airs here. Be who you are and feel comfortable in that.

As to what excites him, Erik eagerly detailed how his passion work extends beyond the halls of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and into other spaces within and outside of BSU, as long as individuals are open to growing.

> I get a chance to watch leaders develop, right? For people to say 'hey, I came in this way and I'm leaving another way When I leave the campus grounds and I graduate, I can look back and say I'm not the same person I was when I walked in, I learned something different through the Office of Multicultural Affairs. I went to this women's history program, I went to this Hispanic heritage event, and I was able to learn it from a different culture, look through a different lens of life, and expand my worldview.' That's what excites… like when students get excited about learning something that's different than what they know. That excites me.

Erik's pathway to his current role in the Office of Multicultural Affairs illustrates how he is not only passionate about HESA work, but how he views the office as a gateway to that leads to growth, understanding, and education. He also detailed that working in HESA is something people do who have a "deep love" for this work. He believes in this so deeply that he calls it passion work, and this is work that he is "drawn to."

Towards a DEI Identity

As an experienced HESA professional, Erik has worked in a myriad of functional areas and each role has helped develop his DEI identity. Erik learned a great deal about the principles of DEI throughout his HESA career and accredited the growth in his DEI identity to his career experiences across all the functional areas he worked in.

> …Even working at an HBCU, historically Black college, right? There's still a diversity of thought, there's a diversity of culture... Yes, I mean we may all be Black, but we have Black Christians, Black Catholics, Black Muslims. We have people from first-generation college homes, single-parent homes, two-parent homes, we have single parents, we have veterans, right? And so, it's been developed over my entire career, right? Looking at the diversity of thought, appreciating and respecting that diversity of thought, being able to create or at least strive really hard to create equitable spaces for people on campus and then even in, you know, opportunities that we have one campus and then be able to include everyone in the programs… I think people say, oh, inclusion, that means you can participate, Tika. But what does inclusion really look like, right? Are you including those folks who may have a disability or who may need a special accommodation? Are you including those folks who may not be familiar? Are you including those folks who don't look like you, right?... So, yes, I would say I've developed this DEI identity over the course of these last 16 years, right, because it moves just beyond my job. It moves to the career that I have, right? Providing these diverse programs, opportunities, and experiences for students to

engage, creating these equitable spaces for students to live, learn and thrive, and then including all the backgrounds and cultures that I serve…

In his first three HESA roles, he worked at small, private HBCUs. When he began his first role as an administrative assistant, he viewed the Black experience through a narrow lens that showed Black people as monolithic. Across an eight year period, from 2008-2016, he was challenged to think about DEI differently. While in these positions, his understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion expanded because he was exposed to various types of Black identities, and he learned about the expansiveness of Blackness.

Well, that's a good question. I would say it's developed because, you know, when I worked, when I worked at my first HBCU, where you fresh out of undergrad, I was like, oh, you know, hey, we're all Black, you know, all the students are Black. Hey, let's live a little bit, let's have a good time, right, we all have the same experiences. But as I, you know, I worked in enrollment management, and you would hear students come in with their stories of, you know, being a foster child, being a ward of the state, or their parents dying early because their parents had terminal diseases, or they're barely making it out of school, I had two parents, but I still can't afford school. I think it's there that I really developed who I am as a person, who I am as a professional, realizing that, yes, we all go to this historically or we all – the students are going to historically Black college – but there are so many nuances in this historically Black college and university, right? So many different perspectives, right? Yes, we all look alike but our thought process is all the way different. And so, that's when it started for me. I think it's developed over time, and I think it's made me a better professional for allowing

> myself to see through what some people say, like a singular opportunity, right? And I think it's developed me as a professional to be a person who is not only equity-minded but someone who is able to branch beyond my comfort zones and really making sure that everyone gets the full experience of the opportunity they're currently in.

Erik's DEI identity also has underpinnings in his upbringing. His grandmother taught him the importance of helping others. Based upon how he has led his life and career goals, situating diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the forefront was imperative for him to feel fulfilled in his work. Moreover, Erik transitioned from housing and residential life – the area he worked in most of his career – to a DEI functional area because he wanted to do work he believed had purpose, which he did not sense in his housing roles, particularly within the role that preceded his current role in the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

> You know, Tika, one of the things that I believe led me to this – so, my grandmother played a very pivotal role in my upbringing, right? And she would always say that 'we are helpers one to another.' And the church I went to growing up would always say that, you know, 'our doors swing on welcome hinges.' For me, being in the DEI space not only allowed me to share my experience with students, but it also allowed them to share their experiences and their life journeys with me, right? I'm the kind of person that my granny would always say 'you learn something new every day.' I want to come to work every day and be inspired by a different culture, different music, food, language, right? For me that is fulfilling. I wanted to get back to that space where, you know, you have these

> brilliant voices who are shining, amplifying their lights to everybody. I'm the kind of person in my life that everyone is included, I don't care. I'm like Forrest Gump, okay. If you want to walk up and talk, let's talk, right? I don't judge anybody, right? Whatever your life story is, your journey, your gender, your sexuality, your religious background, political affiliation; I don't care, let's have a conversation, let's talk. I like to learn about people. That's how we grow as people, right? I'm willing to have a conversation with someone who's different than me. And so, for me that's why I came back to the [DEI] space, you know, to be fulfilled and enriched every day of my life – knowing that my work has purpose, and it has meaning, and I'm impacting the next generation of change agents who will influence decision-making and policy on protecting those who are different than the majority.

Erik's DEI identity is a salient part of who is as a HESA professional and as person. His upbringing and faith played a role in planting the seeds for his DEI identity, while his career experiences watered the soil and nurtured this part of him until it blossomed. Now, he is planting seeds in his students, on the BSU campus, and all other areas of his life. It is "fulfilling" for Erik to learn about and uplift others who are different from him and it also helps him continue to develop his DEI identity.

DEI Work is not a Performance – Middle

Along Erik's HESA journey, there were some valleys. One poignant experience he recalled occurred during the period of Donald Trump's election campaign to be the 45th president of the United States of America. At this time, he was employed at The Retreat and throughout his tenure there he noted there was a shift in the national zeitgeist

during the late 2010s through the early 2020s. The election of the 45th president had an impact on Erik's life and his students' lives – this was evidenced by his reaction to the election results of 2016.

> …For a lot of my students, a lot of my Black and Brown students and first-gen students, it [the election] was a major blow for them, right? That president at the time had talked about rolling back protections for first-gen students and Students of Color and those who are on DACA. You know, to watch their reactions when it was announced that he won, it was almost like a funeral. I can't even describe it. Like, the overwhelming sadness in that moment knowing that I couldn't do anything to quell the fears of my students, right? I was a little nervous, too. I'm like, yeah, I'm a Black man in America. At that time, you saw what's going on with Black men. It was, you know, every other month, every other week sometimes it was a different shooting or a police beating. I think it was that moment – because I hadn't been in my role not even five months – but it was at that moment that I knew I had to be a resource for students who either didn't have a voice to speak up, or to be an amplifier for voices that were there, but not amplified, and to create spaces where the Black and Brown voices where they could feel appreciated in the college setting. So, that was a defining moment for me.

The election results cemented in Erik's mind that he "had to be a resource for students." This meant he did not have a choice in the matter; he *had* to help, serve, and support his students even when he was unsure about how things might impact his work in The Retreat during Trump's presidency. This is another example of his *passion work,* a

throughline of this work in HESA. He also reflected on the experiences of Black men in the US such as police violence, brutality, and death at the hands of the police. As he recounted his fears, it was palpable; yet he repressed his own feelings to ensure his students had the support they needed to address issues facing their communities.

Erik also explained that to do DEI work one must believe in its principles and put them into action. Along his path towards a DEI identity, a defining moment for him was determining that DEI work could not be performative. He had to put in the work and demonstrate his commitment to advancing equity work beyond the hours of 9a-5p.

> It has to be something that you walk and that you talk, Tika. It has to be something that – it's not just performative, right? If those [DEI principles] aren't things that are supported, celebrated, and valued in your own personal life, then it's going to be hard to translate it to the center for other folks to believe in. My grandmother always told us growing up 'if you don't believe in yourself, how can you expect others to believe in you?' So, when I think about how can I expect others to believe in and pour into my center if I'm not believing in and pouring into my center with my full, authentic, transparent self and all of my passions.

DEI for Erik is not something he simply does for work; DEI are values he holds within his own value system. In the Office of Multicultural Affairs, he also operates from a space of passion, love, and commitment to DEI values to uplift and encourage marginalized student populations.

He also discussed an annual event hosted by his office that brings together various campus and community organizations. He explained that the energy that pulsates through the event is electric. There is a spirit of oneness and community that is tangible during the

event, and he stated he wants this feeling to seep into every crevice of campus and be a part of the daily experience everyone has at BSU. In doing so, the intentionality behind uplifting DEI work will become a part of the fabric of campus.

> We have an event every year and that brings together all our campus partners [and] some of our community partners to share resources with our multicultural student population. I want to see that every day – we can rely on our campus partners, community partners, [and] alumni to come in and share their resources almost like a bartering system, right? Or you know, the word *ubuntu* [an African concept meaning humanness or humanity]…I want to see that every day. I want to see that every day and not where it's performative, where it's actually put into action every day.

As Erik furthered his HESA career, he honed his DEI identity while working at HBCUs and The Retreat, which played pivotal roles in helping him determine he wanted to work in DEI spaces. Equipped with lessons from his grandmother and church and inspired by the idea of working with different cultures daily, Erik was excited to go to work every day and learn. Additionally, as he draws closer to his 20 year mark in HESA, he basks in the opportunity to pour into students and his staff, even in the face of adversity.

Does it Take All That?: Navigating Changes to DEI Work at BSU

Erik has experienced firsthand how challenges to DEI can shape his work now, without any laws being enacted that ban DEI work in his state. He shared a story about a time when his office co-presented with admissions. The presentation was catered to

multicultural student services available to students at BSU. During the presentation he encountered someone who, in Erik's view, did not attend the presentation in good faith.

> You know, we had a – we have a multicultural admissions presentation for both campuses. So, the admissions office – is basically bringing together, you know, first-gen and professionals of color, faculty, and staff, you know, so you can kind of see the support systems you have on campus. We were on Zoom and I'm like, oh, this is fun, let's go! At that time, you know, my boss was always telling me, like,[you] gotta be mindful of what you say – which, you know, I'm always mindful of what I say; I take time to think before I speak. We had a person come on Zoom, [who] would not turn their camera on, right? And the name was like 'unknown.' And I was like, okay. And so, you know, we're asking questions like, oh, you know, what is campus life like? You know, what's the student makeup? What kind of clubs are there for me? He says, 'I have a question.' So, we said 'yes, how can we help you?' And he was like 'how do you weave the teaching of critical race theory into your educational components on campus?' I mean a completely out of left field question like, sir that is not the purpose of tonight. And so, one of my colleagues, you know, tried to answer it, you know, as politically best as possible, and it just didn't work out. And he was like 'that was a great scripted answer, but I would like a real answer from somebody who could, you know, tell me how you all weave critical race theory in your classrooms, and what do you do for folks who are not comfortable with it?' And I say, you know what? You're not going to get me to give you a sound bite, okay, for you to use something and you're not going to come on screen so I can see who you are. You

> could be a legislator or anybody! We have to be very careful about what we say and what we do because people are waiting for one slip up to say, oh, well down there at Broadview State, you know, ABCD and they're not doing this, this, and this, you know. I'm not giving you an answer.

In addition, his office was required to change their DEI presentations because someone was “offended” by some of the content and shared their disapproval with an administrator in the System of Broadview. Interestingly, some anti-DEI bills ban content and concepts that make some individuals feel a sense of discomfort. Erik explained that due to this complaint, the approval processes for DEI presentations through his office changed.

> Someone went through the [university] system – they were offended at one of the presentations that one of our sister schools did or facilitated – and whoever they spoke to must have enough power to make this decision. The state legislature asked the system or the you know, the System of Broadview.... The president [of the university] and the vice president of HR must approve any presentation given on diversity, equity, or inclusion. So, that's been one of the things that's been really frustrating, because you know the president has to approve everything? Like that is so nitpicky! Again, like I mentioned, out of all the things you could be focused on, you focus on something that's as minute as how do you define diversity? What is it teaching the people? So, it has affected you, right? So, we did have to – we started out with eight presentations, and we now only have three that we're able to give at the current time.

When Erik and his staff were tasked with changing their DEI presentations at the behest of the state legislature, they were initially given two weeks to submit the revised presentations. In revising all their presentations, they had to remove "specific instances of diversity, equity, and inclusion," and the presentations had to follow certain regulations which would, as Erik stated make the presentations "very broad, very general, very watered down." The state legislature also put forth what topics could be discussed in the presentations. Revising the presentation proved to be a daunting task as each presentation was between 15-20 slides and Erik and his staff were asked to make these changes during a busy time in their office. As the deadline drew approached, Erik and his staff did have to request more time to get the presentations "up to par." Regarding how his institution and office confronted the challenges against DEI, Erik shared that they could not truly pushback against these changes as they were coming from the state legislature, however, he was appreciative of the support the president of BSU extended to his office.

> Well, it was really more of a we kind of have no choice, right? We had to comply with what the governor, with what the state legislature was saying. I think even in that we were responsive. Our president – I really appreciate our president – he was really instrumental in getting us more time to make sure that we could actually be successful in in this task that we were given a very short amount of time on, but also standing up and letting the system know that the work we do in the cultural center is valid. The students are serviced and because of our service their grade point averages are up, their engagement is up, and their giving is up for those who've graduated, right?

Erik admitted that before he learned about the changes they had to make to the DEI presentations, he had been following discussions in the state legislature about DEI in higher education. He detailed that if the state passed legislation impacting DEI efforts, his work in the Office of Multicultural Affairs would drastically change.

> A challenge that has been on my mind for the last year – the state is looking at legislation – [that] is going to limit the work that we can do in our spaces, right? To limit the name and what we're able to present to people about through the multicultural center. And so, that's a huge challenge for me because, you know, out of all the things that you could be focusing on poverty, homelessness, you know, infrastructure and our roads and our government, you want to focus on presentations to talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion because a few people felt uncomfortable? And so, for me that's a huge challenge that challenges my philosophy, right, because before long you'll tell me, hey, you can't talk about diversity in the cultural center, right? And so that's a big challenge.

Erik expressed that the challenges against DEI "sicken" him. For him and his students, engaging with this work is what gets them up in the morning or keeps them enrolled. As such, for there to be concerted efforts to dismantle DEI initiatives and relieve staff from the DEI positions, he affirmed how jarring and frustrating it is to work under such circumstances. Erik added that these efforts are misplaced and there should be a focus on other pressing issues facing the constituents of his state.

> It sickens me, honestly. Again, like I said, out of all the things you could be focused on the major priorities: highway infrastructure, poverty, homelessness, mental health and wellness, veteran support, you focus on the most minute thing!

> Out of the things the president has to worry about fundraising, campus security, and making sure that the academic integrity is upheld, and you want to give him an assignment to read over presentations?! Out of all of the things we could focus on, this what you want me to do? Okay. So, it sickens me; this is out of all the things that we focus on, this [DEI] is what you choose to attack? Something that is not affecting you as a person! It's a thought process, right? So, it frustrates me, and it sickens me.

Sustaining DEI Efforts in an Anti-DEI State

Dozens of states have introduced anti-DEI bills in the last few years, and where Erik lives is not an exception. Erik recalled the changes to the DEI presentations and his supervisor's title– which changed from chief diversity officer to a more ambiguous title – were the only major changes he had experienced. Even in the face of these changes, he maintained that he and his staff would continue to do DEI until they legally have been told they cannot do this work.

> I'm still gonna be who I am. We're still gonna offer the services that we offer. You're still gonna see the same level of passion, enthusiasm, excitement, and advocacy from my office until we're told to do otherwise. And then at that time, you know, we'll look at some different career options, right? Because yeah like, you're micromanaging at that point. You're micromanaging from a lens that you've never, that you've never had a chance to look through. You've always had this lens of privilege and class, but you want to micromanage those who are already under you financially. You want to micromanage them even more to limit

> their access, and that's disgusting. It's not hurting you. It's not offending you. It's not messing with your bottom line.

He stated that if legislation is passed that bans or severely limits DEI work he would consider working in a different functional area within HESA, because the work would not be the same.

> It would definitely be a thought. As I'm sure for my other brothers and sisters who work in DEI in the state. It's almost like you're on pins and needles waiting for a decision to be made that you have no control over, but you're the subject matter expert.

Erik also explained how the challenges against DEI work affected him mentally and emotionally. He placed great emphasis on how these challenges impacted him mentally as he thought about what these changes would mean for his students.

> I would just say I'm always concerned about my students, right? I want them to have the best experience possible on these campuses. And so, it affects me mentally – I really want to ensure that they have a good time, that they're also learning, and can also share their culture with other people. So, for me it's more of a mental thing, but I just focus on the positive things that we're doing and I don't let the negativity jump in. Focus on the good things, keep that at the forefront of your mind and keep pushing.

However, he noted that focusing on "the good things" and not letting the negative thoughts overcome him are what kept him going and being in good spirits to best support his students. He reiterated that his focus was on his students' mental and emotional health during this time.

I just want to make sure that my students have a great experience and so, you always get that emotion of angst, but other than that we just keep pushing. You know the same financially, the same physically you have, you have to keep going even in the midst of adversity, right?

As far as how these challenges impacted him spiritually, he leaned on his faith. “Gotta keep praying and believing and hoping for the best.”

Furthermore, although the discourse around DEI elicited emotionally charged exchanges across higher education, Erik is unwavering in his desire to “keep riding.”

> You know, how they say we’re gonna ride this thing til the wheels fall off. That’s what we're doing. And then as resilient as we are as cultural center staff, we'll just rebuild the wheel and keep riding again.

Not Just Talking the Talk: A Counterstory– End

Cultural centers and related offices are communal spaces that were designed to support minoritized student populations on predominantly white campuses. These centers have been on PWI campuses for over 50 years and contemporarily the centers are still extending support services to students as discussed in chapter two. Today, narratives about cultural centers and DEI work at-large are being presented in a way that positions these centers and DEI efforts as exclusionary and misaligned with institutional missions and higher education values overall (Patton et al., 2019). Erik argued that DEI is being misinterpreted and misrepresented by many people because of fear.

> What frustrates me is people who don't understand, you know, that diversity, equity, and inclusion, is not an attack on society. People just want to feel like they belong, like they're a part of this woven fabric that we call America. And that

> there are people, because of their lack of understanding, that will try and dismantle programs that allow people to succeed in spaces that weren't built for them, that's what frustrates me. You know, you have people who say, oh pull yourself up by the bootstraps or it doesn't take all that. For some people, *all that* is all they have sometimes. That's what frustrates [me], people who don't, people who have this privilege and they don't realize it. And they spew things out that are not helpful or kind, or they build upon the success of others. That's what frustrates me.

Contrarily, to the concerns that DEI efforts encourage exclusion of some groups of people, Erik believes that folks' individual backgrounds and differing perspectives is what makes engaging with culture centers a unique experience and a rich source of intercultural and cross-cultural immersions on PWI campuses.

> My identity informs my view of cultural centers. It's really simple, right? I come from a variety of places, right? And so, I subscribe to a variety of thoughts. And so, culture centers for me, allows anybody to come through who also subscribes to a variety of thought processes or looks at life through different lenses, who identifies as this and that to come in and feel like they have a safe space, right? Where they can relax and indulge and be their true and authentic selves in whatever identity that may be. So, that's my view on a culture center. I want people to come in and share their culture, right? I want them to be centered in their culture, but to be able to feel free to come in and share themselves with others, their experiences, challenges, thought processes, and then share their love

> and the passion they have and share their culture with other people who may be unfamiliar.

As director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and a self-identified DEI professional, Erik explained that to have a respectful campus community reflected back to him, he must “model” the way and not only tell students how to be welcoming of others but show them through his actions. He explained his center’s DEI efforts as “walking what we talk.”

> …. [For example], we're giving presentations and telling our students to be open to different thought processes, life lessons, and cultures, then we as a staff have to be open to those same things, right? And so, walking what we talk allows students to see us and to model our behavior, which then helps them grow as people…

Furthermore, Erik believes it is a “privilege” to meet “different people” every day. For him, the DEI efforts advanced by his office demonstrates the vastness of Broadview State University’s diversity and the opportunities for growth in the institution’s DEI efforts. Erik recounted how his office embodies the concepts of DEI in practice and does not shy away from uplifting the differences that makeup the tapestry of BSU. He acknowledged diversity is a concept that extends beyond race and skin color, as diversity includes a gamut of identities and backgrounds within the human experience.

> So, when I think about diversity, people often classify it as Black or white. Diversity goes well beyond that; it's a very large scope. I think about religious affiliation, political affiliations, hair color, skin color, religious background. I think about, you know, if you're a first-generation college student, I think about if you have a, you know, a disability… What's your background look like? Are your

parents veterans? Are you a veteran? Are you a military child? Are you an only child?...

He explained that equity is a mission that HESA professionals must strive towards to ensure all individuals who come to the campus have impartial experiences within and outside of the campus community.

> When I think about equity, I think about making sure – we have an assignment, a challenge, a mission – we have a mission to ensure that all those who walk through our doors have equal spaces to live, learn, and thrive. That's how I look at equity, and that's across the board. So, even when you leave the college sphere I want you to have equitable workspaces, pay…[and] treatment at the job regardless of disability, educational status, socioeconomic background, or current socioeconomic status.

Additionally, he described inclusion as a means of accessing opportunities, financial resources, and information. Erik explained that to ensure all students have access to the same educational opportunities, institutions must develop strategies that will address the disparate experiences of students and implement corrective practices that will foster inclusive campus environments.

> And then when I think about inclusion, I think about being able to include everybody, not just those that can afford the inclusion. I think people often don't think about that. Well, can Johnny afford to come to this college? Oh, okay, well then he can't come. What about those who really have extenuating circumstances, right? Being able to spread that inclusion across the board, what are things or strategies that we could use to make sure that everyone has access to this

> opportunity? That's inclusion for me, going over and beyond the everyday to make sure that students feel comfortable, they feel safe, and they feel like, hey, this opportunity is available to me and I'm glad about it.

Erik's conceptualizations of diversity, equity, and inclusion highlight the understanding and application of these concepts from the vantage point of someone who works in designated DEI space daily. What some detractors described as exclusionary (Cliburn, 2023;Wood, 2023), he countered and asserted DEI initiatives *do* benefit institutions at-large by valuing, welcoming, and respecting the differences everyone brings to higher education institutions. His office is a space where students can share their cultures and learn about others. However, he did acknowledge the cultural exchange amongst those who engage with his office is not always symbiotic in nature.

> I would say it should, it *should*, keyword *should*. It should be an even exchange; however, we know that oftentimes it's not an even exchange. I would always tell people, you know, I'm always open to questions, right? Once we've had a conversation, if you say, oh, I don't understand this or, you know, I still have several questions, then the onus is on you to, you know, to go and look things up, right? To research, do some research of your own. I don't I mind answering follow up questions, right, but at some point you have to do a little research on your own…But, you know, allow yourself to be immersed in somebody else's culture too. Like, there's nothing wrong with doing research on somebody else, right? If they say, you know, hey, I heard you mention this, this and this in your presentation, I have some follow up questions. I've done a little research, now I have some follow up questions, I don't mind things like that. But when you don't

> do your research and you expect folks from underrepresented populations to continue to tell the story and continue to be in the hot seat, if you would, then that becomes a problem, right? At some point, you have to be respectful enough to say, you know what, I should just be quiet.

Furthermore, Erik's conceptualization of DEI are not only grounded in his experiences as a DEI professional, but his understanding of these concepts are also colored by his Christian faith, his personal guiding principles for life, and his grandmother's teachings. He strives to "extend the love of Christ" to those who have been "discarded." In his role in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, it is not about espousing "church work" onto others, but rather modeling the love of Christ in his work. Erik reiterated that his upbringing in church introduced him to the idea of being welcoming to all. Erik also shared his personal guiding principles for life are: "respect for all people; the thought that you learn something new every day; and that you are… I think it's really Gandhi's thought: be the change you wish to see." He added "that's how I live my life…I hope that students and my colleagues can see that reflected in the work that I do."

"Making a Moses Way"

As a DEI professional, Erik has his own definition of cultural centers and their roles on PWI campuses that are shaped by his identities and experiences. For Erik, cultural centers are recruitment and retention tools and spaces where students can share their culture with one another in a safe space. He elucidated that institutions are recruiting diverse student bodies; therefore, they should have resources, services, and staff in place to support their unique needs, which at the minimum are cultural centers at PWIs.

> When I come into this space I'm not only in a safe space, but I can be authentic, my authentic self. I can take off the mask. We often talk about the mask that we wear. When you come into these spaces, it's a chance for you to take a take a breather from the world that is outside, the world that is constantly demeaning you, stereotyping you, and committing microaggressions against you. When you walk through the doors, that cultural space allows you a chance to take a breather, it allows you to be yourself without fear of retribution or revenge or asinine questions. You can just *be* in the space. That's the role of cultural centers across the country, right? We have to support what's coming along. As we understand it, you know, in 2040 or 2050 the makeup of the population of the US is gonna look very different. So, these institutions have to be ready and have people in place to support the changes that are coming down the pipeline, right? If you're changing legislation to make the majority feel comfortable, what are you going to put in place to make sure that students who are affected by these decisions, minority students, feel comfortable as well? I feel like having a cultural center is the least you can do, but there should also be staff, there should be tutoring services, and there should be funding to have programs – adequate funding – and not just stereotypical programming, either

In the face of potential adversity, Erik welcomed the idea of "making a Moses way." He explained making a Moses way has dual meanings:

> [In the Bible] Moses was a leader amongst people who were frustrated and complaining about the current circumstances they were facing but he kept them inspired in the lowest moments of frustrations. Moses also had to stretch out even

> when he didn't see the way ahead and trust in the faith that he told others about. I can understand he did not think the waters would part when he stretched out the rod, but he went forward with hope and faith.

This means if sweeping changes are made to the operations of his office, the passion and dedication he and his staff have for this work is unshakable. They will make a Moses way by keeping their students' spirits high and inspiring them *through* these challenging times. For Erik specifically, he will remain steadfast in his faith and "go forward" believing that he will be able to continue serving students in a way that is authentic to him.

Erik's philosophy of cultural centers has not changed after the introduction of anti-DEI legislation. However, he admitted his philosophy will probably change if the legislation passes. A bill was introduced in his state that aimed to limit DEI practices in hiring. While this bill does not directly impact DEI offices and funding, reverberations of such sentiments have influenced institutional policies which came byway of the state legislature. Erik discussed the changes that have occurred at BSU have not been sweeping in that his office is still operational and implementing programming that highlights various cultures on campus. Yet, there are some aspects of DEI work that have been limited such as the regulations regarding DEI presentations. In response to how or if the current political climate has changed or challenged his philosophy of cultural centers, Erik explained that nothing has changed for him.

> …I stand on the fact that we're in these spaces to serve others, and even when the legislation comes, we're still gonna be in these spaces to serve others. Will we have to change our programming? Probably. But that will not change the staff

> support, the dedication, or the passion that I have or that my staff has to making sure that you're successful outside of the classroom. You know, it's just like I think about the word resiliency. You know, we had the civil rights movement. You put all these things into place, you can't drink at this fountain, you can't sit in the front of the bus, you can't eat at this counter, you can't go to this entertainment facility. What did we do? We made things on our own, we created things, we innovated things to make sure that we still had spaces. And so, even when these bills come it'll be just like the civil rights movement. We're going to rise up and say, okay, you may think you may have won this one, but we're going to rise up and we're still going to be successful. We're going to thrive. So, my stance is not going to change, you know? I still believe in educating of minds and I want them to be successful…

In addition, Erik's unshakable faith allows him to stand firmly on his ideals associated with supporting students. He contended that legislative decisions against DEI efforts will not change how he feels, thinks, or acts regarding DEI work. Based upon what he shared, his work is inextricably linked to his philosophy of cultural centers and how he defines and understands DEI as a practice and as principles that should be advanced in higher education. This work allows him to teach, support, and learn from communities that have historically been "discarded,." Bans or limitations to this work will negatively impact how he will be able to support students.

> It has not changed my thought or my definitions at all. I still believe in providing services and I believe in what I said. In the words of King [Harris], you know, I 'stand on business,' right? I'm not easily swayed, right, because you're going to

> threaten me. Oh, this is the law, you can't do this, you can't do that. So, what you're telling me is I can't support students. I can't ensure their success as students. I can't ensure they matriculate or that they thrive at the institution. I can't teach them resilience and persistence. That's what you're telling me, right? And so, that’s not gonna change. I look forward to the actual decisions being made to see what gets put into law because that will tell me the interest you have in educating the next generation of change agents. If you're willing to limit their thoughts, learning, thinking, what else are you wanting to limit? Why are you so afraid? And what are you afraid they're gonna learn, you know? So, it's not going to change regardless, whenever it comes out, it's not going to change.

Synopsis

Erik is an experienced HESA professional who believes he is called to do this passion work. He continually seeks to embody the lessons his grandmother taught him, with one of the most salient ones being “we are helpers one to another.” Each day he goes to work in the Office of Multicultural Affairs is an opportunity for him to learn and grow personally and professionally and it is also an opportunity for him to help his students learn and grow. Diversity, equity, and inclusion work for him was never a choice – it has always been a part of him. Growing up in the church, his grandmother’s influence on his life, his experiences working at HBCUs, and his guiding principles for life all play a role in him being on this path. These experiences also aid in him “lifting” the weight off of the Communities of Culture he serves every day as they encounter some hostilities associated with predominantly white spaces. Thus, he will not be deterred from supporting students in ways that center their lived experiences and amplify their voices.

You should get joy from watching the students excel and grow personally and professionally, and even their way of thinking, their perspective on life. You should be excited to work with students as they develop and as they grow. For me, watching students go from where they are to where they need to be brings me tons of excitement…

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I put forward the stories of three cultural center staff who shared their experiences operating these centers during a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are under attack. These stories do not represent the full scope of their HESA journeys, as the intent was for me to (a) explore the experiences in cultural centers, (b) highlight defining moments and periods of transition that informed how or when the participants came to understand their DEI identity, which were shaped by their experiences in both HESA and cultural centers, and (c) examine how these experiences and their DEI identity informed how, if at all, the participants would address working in an anti-DEI state thereby illuminating my research questions. The findings were presented through the restorying of the participants' stories which included story elements that chronicled their journey to HESA and experiences in cultural centers that shaped how they came to understand their DEI identity. My adaptation of Nasheeda and colleagues' (2019) multimethod restorying framework informed the pre-analysis, analysis, and collaboration with participants that led to the development of each story shared within this chapter.

The counterstories from Zahir and Erik highlighted their unwavering commitment to advancing DEI not only in their work but in their lives. The two participants' stories directly countered the majoritarian stories being sensationalized in the media wherein DEI efforts are characterized as exclusionary to those in the majority. These sentiments are antithetical to Zahir and Erik's definitions, practice, and conceptualizations of DEI work and principles. Also, for these two participants, the attacks on DEI elicited heightened feelings of anger because they wholeheartedly disagree with the majoritarian

narrative of DEI. Throughout their stories they discussed how DEI work is all encompassing; meaning this work *includes* valuing, seeing, affirming, and respecting the humanity of every person irrespective of identities. However, they also emphasized that DEI work and those who work cultural centers and related spaces have a responsibility to acknowledge that there are systemic barriers interfering with *all* people being able to access resources. As such, they believe the work they do in the cultural center is necessary to support marginalized students on predominately white campuses.

In Dr. Monique's story was multifaceted. A major part of her story was that DEI efforts *should* be dissolved. However, her story is not in alignment with the majoritarian story. Dr. Monique argued the current iteration of DEI does not work in higher education because these efforts do not resolve issues. Her concept of DEI efforts as "Band-Aids" to systemic issues in higher education underscored her belief that DEI efforts should be advances across all areas of higher education and not assigned to one office of unit. She also shared that she believes in principles of DEI; therefore, she will be implementing DEI principles in her work. She is passionate about working with students from marginalized backgrounds, but she does not want to this work under the banner of DEI.

Finally, the stories presented in this chapter detail the experiences of three HESA professionals who work(ed) in cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. In chapter 5, I will present a discussion of the analysis of the findings in light of my study's theoretical framework – critical race theory – and my analytic frameworks: counternarratives and critical race methodology. I will also provide implications for higher education and student affairs research and practice.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

In the section below, I engage in a discussion of my findings and analyze them using the theoretical framework for this study – critical race theory. I examine how the findings bolster and deviate from extant literature on cultural centers and DEI efforts. The critical race theory tenet of counternarratives or counterstories – the stories of those who have been pushed to the margins in society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) – are also uplifted here. In my study, counterstories were employed as an analytic tool in addition to its theoretical underpinnings. The use of counterstories in this way produced multilayered narratives that illustrated the nuanced experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion staff members within cultural centers at predominantly white institutions.

Discussion

My study was underscored by the theoretical framework of critical race theory. The theory informed every aspect of my study from my research agenda, methodology, interview protocols, participant selections, and research sites. My study focused on the experiences of cultural staff at predominantly white institutions, a group that is often under-researched. Research of cultural centers often explores undergraduate student experiences and the history of cultural centers (Hypolite, 2020a; Patton, 2006a; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Shuford, 2011). I specifically wanted to learn from and with cultural center staff – the heartbeat of the cultural centers. Throughout this section, I apply the following CRT tenets: the permanence and intercentricity race, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling.

Cultural Centers: Fixtures of the Permanence of Racism in Higher Education?

In education, the CRT tenet of the permanence of racism explains that racism is an endemic, permanent fixture in the United States that is sustained through systematic structures (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993). "A critical race methodology in education also acknowledges the intercentricity of racialized oppression—the layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). Race and racism cannot be detached from the research on cultural center staff, particularly because of the historical context in which the idea of "cultural centers" were born. As discussed in chapter two, the first cultural centers were Black cultural centers, and they were established in the 1960s after student protests (Young, 2005). At this time, some students were participating in or inspired by social movements such as the civil rights and Chicana/o movements and mobilized on their PWI campuses to demand better conditions for Black students. This history highlights the racist past of higher education as an institution that did not foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. The establishment of cultural centers were a direct response to higher education institutions' mistreatment and exclusion of students based on race.

In this study, the participants identified issues of racism or racialized incidents they experienced or that their students experienced. Dr. Monique described her work in her cultural center as "working with folks who are basically at war every day." Here she acknowledged the students she served – predominantly Students of Color and students from underrepresented backgrounds – experienced racism and racialized incidents. The incident involving the defaced Black Lives Matter mural is a pointed example. Although

this incident did not *directly* involve the center, the center staff were asked to remedy the issue by "painting over the mural." The mural was defaced by an individual that Flash U "traced back to a white supremacy group." As such, the very act of defacing the mural was indicative of the types of racialized incidents Students of Color and Black students face on predominantly white campuses. The center staff "fixing" the issue signaled that such centers are a necessity on PWI campuses because racism persists; this underscored the origins of cultural centers being established because of the racism Black students faced on predominantly white campuses.

The contemporary challenges of being a DEI professional today are widespread. In recent years there has been a steady burn towards dismantling equity focused efforts across all education sectors. There have been challenges against "wokism" or "woke ideologies," CRT, and now DEI. Changing the name of the perceived ills in education does not change the goal to roll back provisions that were established to address systemic inequities in higher education. Erik discussed an incident that occurred during a virtual multicultural admissions session for first-generation students and Students of Color. During the session, a detractor demanded to know "how do you weave the teaching of critical race theory into your educational components on campus?" This story highlighted the real challenges DEI professionals face when trying to implement programs for specific populations. Although there are no laws in his state prohibiting multicultural admissions sessions, Erik shared he is encouraging his team in this charged political environment to help them push forward and continue to advance DEI principles in their work.

Moreover, various studies have been conducted to highlight racism and racialized incidents within higher education institutions (e.g., Apugo, 2021; Briscoe, 2022b; Truong, 2016). For example, Gildersleeve and colleagues (2011) found Black doctoral students report higher instances of racial discrimination than their Latine and white peers. Slay and associates (2019) found Students of Color experienced racial microaggressions within a psychology doctoral program that had, in recent years, made a concerted effort to recruit and enroll an increased number of Black and Latine graduate students. Students of Color were recruited under the guise that the program had a diverse student body, and the faculty were committed to DEI work. Notably, Slay and colleagues found Students of Color experienced a "bait and switch" wherein student were "sold" on the program's purported "centrality of diversity;" however, once they began the program, students experienced discrimination and everyday microaggressions (p. 280). These studies illustrate the pervasive nature of racism and racialized incidents in higher education. The students' experiences demonstrate how race and racism in higher education and more broadly in the US, continues to shape and reshape systemic issues. Additionally, these studies speak to Dr. Monique describing her students' experiences as a "war" and this permanence of racism in turn highlights the necessity of cultural centers.

Traversing the Perilous Journey Towards Anti-DEI in Higher Education: Whiteness as Property

Currently, there are over 30 bills aimed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at public colleges and university in the United States. Bryant and Appleby (2024) note that a growing number of states are introducing legislation to restrict or ban DEI initiatives (para. 1). The bills target various DEI efforts such as

funding, practices, hiring, training, promotions, and admissions. As of March 2024, nine bills have been signed into law by a governor (Bryant & Appleby, 2024). The states currently with anti-DEI laws include Indiana, North Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, Texas, Idaho, Tennessee, Florida, North Carolina, and Alabama.

One of the participants works in a state that has an anti-DEI bill and all of the participants shared narratives about how they would personally address working in a state with an anti-DEI law(s). They also shared how, if at all, their cultural center, and institution would address an anti-DEI law. Lawmakers in Erik's state have introduced anti-DEI legislation, although at the time of this study, no bills had been signed into law. Interestingly, however, he shared a story about how a complaint against a DEI presentation at one of his institution's sister campuses led to a new process for developing and getting approval for DEI presentations.

The CRT tenet of whiteness as property interrogates racial identity and property as intersecting concepts. Capper (2019) asserted that through the historical conceptions of race and racism in the US and the reification of these concepts through jurisprudence, whiteness is a property interest (p. 104). In this light, cultural centers can be viewed through this lens and characterized as property of PWIs; thus, by extension the work produced by the staff in these centers are property interests. As such, the new process for DEI presentations at Broadview State University illustrated "the liberal view of property that includes exclusive rights of possession, use…" and the attribute of "the right to use and enjoyment and the right to exclude others" (Harris, 1993, p. 1731). Whiteness is both an element of identity and a property interest, therefore it can be "experienced and deployed as a resource" (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). Thus, whiteness is not a stagnant social

construction of racial identity; it can be used to exercise power and to carry out the will of those in power. The person who objected to the DEI presentations at Broadview State University, "must have had some power" as Erik stated, to be able to speak to a BSU system administrator and affect changes to the DEI presentations. The racial identity of the person who sent in the complaint and the system administrator are unknown, but in this vein the administrator exercised their power to carry out a will towards limiting or eliminating DEI efforts. Moreover, this action further illustrated DEI work as a property interest that PWIs want to assume power over to ensure DEI presentations, for example, are not "too woke" as to upend the institution's (an entity that employes whiteness) right to possess and use the DEI presentations to acquiesce to a political agenda aimed against DEI efforts.

The possession of property includes the "absolute right to exclude" as the exclusion of others who are "not white" characterizes whiteness (Harris, 1993, p. 1736). Zahir explained that the Black cultural center is viewed as the "space for Black students, that's it." This perspective of the BCC is an example of property that is absolutely excluded from the X University campus. If the BCC is boxed into the "space for Black students," XU is perpetuating a right to exclude the center and the students who engage with its programs from the larger, oftentimes whiter, campus activities. Additionally, race and ethnicity – specifically of groups that have been historically and contemporarily pushed into the margins – serve as one of the first precursors to establishing a DEI initiative. The establishment of cultural centers were originally created for specific groups such as Black students. Therefore, the delegating of nonwhite persons into cultural centers helps maintain other campus spaces as protected property. Patton and

colleagues (2019) posited that cultural centers are often perceived as social and cultural programming spaces that do not have academic advantages. This is notable because Students of Color and underrepresented student populations are the majority demographics that activate cultural centers. In this sense, XU and other PWIs play an active role in this right to exclude cultural centers – spaces that do not have the privilege of whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Commodification and objectification were also highlighted as forms of property interests. The participants' cultural centers are visual markers of "diversity" and help the institutions sustain their commitment to DEI. Zahir's BCC was perceived as the programming space for Black students; Dr. Monique hosted hundreds of DEI related programs in her center across three years; and Erik and his staff led DEI programming across multiple campuses. The programming content served the interests of the institutions, that is it "checks the DEI box." The staff in this vein are commodities as they produce products to be consumed by the greater predominantly white campus community. Instead of valuing the center staff for their individual and unique contributions to the campus community (Lewis & Shah, 2021), their work in the center is objectified and marketed as *the* DEI space instead of *one* of the many spaces on their respective campuses that aims to advance DEI principles in their work.

Patchwork: How DEI Efforts Converge With Higher Education Institutions' Interests

Interest convergence posits that changes in racial equity and advancements for People of Color only occur when interests converge with the interests of white people (Bell, 1980; Harris et al., 2015). DEI initiatives such as cultural centers were created to

address higher education institutions' historical legacy of exclusion of Students of Color on predominantly white campuses and to improve campus racial climates (Hikido & Murray, 2016). Dr. Monique spoke directly to the checkered systems that paved the way for cultural centers and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and posits these initiatives were "Band-Aids." Dr. Monique's Band-Aid theory regarding DEI efforts highlights how issues within higher education are in a cycle of oppression. In her submission, efforts under the DEI umbrella such as cultural centers, are a Band-Aid to succor "topical wounds;" as such, these efforts never go beyond the surface to repair "torn ligaments or fractured bones." If institutions are only implementing DEI efforts because of mandated laws, for example, then the efforts established under these laws were Band-Aids. The systemic issues that inspired these laws should be addressed, if not, the Band-Aids can be applied and removed through the US courts (e.g., passage of anti-DEI laws) and via institutional policies (e.g., changes to DEI presentations at Broadview State University).

Dr. Monique's story about being "Superwoman" and working in a center where "they expect everything" from her was indicative of cultural center staff being commodified. Her labor, which often exceeded the average 40-hour workweek and her university commitments that were not a part of her work in the center (e.g., advising student groups, university committees, president of the Black faculty/staff resource group), demonstrated how her original acceptance of the Superwoman mantle was exploited by the institution. The work Dr. Monique produced in the center was valuable, but also made out to be commodity wherein various groups across campus contacted her to collaborate under the banner of the center. However, her being rendered the go-to

“DEI expert” led to stress and her placing her peace and health on the backburner in the name of DEI.

Zahir also shared a story about his institution’s endeavor to create an inclusive campus by organizing a unity walk. The walk was supposed to celebrate the diversity of the X University campus; however, it highlighted the disparate understandings of “unity.” Zhair noted that during the walk there were visible lines of demarcation separating students by athletic programs (e.g., football, basketball, soccer) and no other student groups attended the event. Rather than holding these kinds of veiled attempts to show how diverse X University is, Zahir called to implement DEI principles into the “DNA” of the institution across all campus units, offices, and departments. Likewise, Dr. Monique challenged higher education institutions at-large to examine their DEI initiatives and determine if they are “Band-Aids” or if they actually address systemic issues for the betterment of their campuses. The participants’ stories underscored how their interests as DEI professionals who do this work daily are diverging from their institutions, as they recognize that such performative DEI work will not alleviate the need for systemic changes across higher education.

In addition, institutions market compositional diversity to bring positive attention to the institution and to present themselves as a “good” place for Black and Students of Color to consider attending. Marketing “diversity” thereby attracts Black and Students of Color as potential consumers (Harris et al., 2015). These sentiments can also be understood in the establishment of cultural centers. These centers serve as recruitment and retention tools for Black students, Students of Color, and other underrepresented populations. Zahir spoke to this when he discussed how the dismantling of the BCC

would mentally affect him. He specifically shared that for some students, the BCC is *why* they go to class every day, because afterwards they can go to the BCC – a space that "belongs to them," makes them "feel safe," and "feel they authentic self." The institutions have a vested interest in sustaining these centers as they help recruit and retain diverse students. In this way, higher education institutions are interested in offering cultural centers to Students of Color because of their monied interests – more students add to the total amount of state appropriations allocated to public universities and colleges and tuition dollars, for example.

Moreover, the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision was used by Bell (1980) to interrogate the decision and other litigation that centered on racial issues. The *Brown* decision occurred about 14 years before the establishment of the first BCCs in the US. In this light, cultural centers at their inception can be understood as property interests of PWIs. These institutions were being met with criticism and student protests because they were not providing equitable and inclusive campuses for underrepresented students; yet they purported to value diversity. Notably, cultural centers and their staff take on DEI efforts and are used to address issues facing Black students and Students of Color. This system relinquishes the responsibility and care of addressing systemic issues from the university/college and places the onus on cultural center staff. The Band-Aid theory offered by Dr. Monique is an example of interest convergence in that higher education institutions implement DEI efforts whenever there are vested interests in expanding and/or improving access to diverse campuses. Currently, however, DEI is not serving white majoritarian interests and these efforts can be easily dissolved or restructured

because, as Dr. Monique and Zahir noted, DEI principles are not ingrained in every university unit, department, office, division, process, practice, and policy.

Counterstories as Resistance

Counterstories amplify the voices of People of Color and their experiential knowledge and places their lived experiences as valid and legitimate forms of knowledge production and ways of being (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In my study, the participants' stories are counter to majoritarian narratives about DEI. Counterstories are a form of resistance. Two participants work in states that have introduced anti-DEI legislation and one lives in a state where an anti-DEI bill has passed. The participants' insistence on sustaining DEI principles in their work within and beyond their cultural centers is an act of resistance that firmly rejects the majoritarian narrative that paints DEI initiatives as "discriminatory" and unnecessary in higher education.

One act of resistance for the participants is through their DEI identity and how this identity will play a role in not only their work but in their lives. Dr. Monique shared that her DEI identity is about "openness," "vulnerability," "authenticity," and "walking in your own truth." Erik's DEI identity meant he will "stand on business" and continue to teach students about "resilience and persistence" regardless of the law. It is important to note the participants' DEI identities are *of* them; therefore, their existence as higher education and student affairs professionals is resistance within this anti-DEI movement. DEI principles are a part of their value systems. Moreover, for Erik and Zahir specifically, their DEI identities were molded from youth. Erik's grandmother and Zahir's mother and grandmother instilled values in them they use today in their DEI

work. Values such as “we are helpers one to another,” be kind, be welcoming, and support those in need are the foundation of Erik and Zahir’s DEI identities.

In another act of resistance, Erik is going to “ride this thing to the wheels fall off” and “rebuild the wheel and keep riding.” The wheel is a metaphor for DEI and in rebuilding the wheel, he is demonstrating an act of resistance. Erik’s commitment to DEI does not begin at 8a and end at 5p Monday through Friday – he believes in providing a space for students to just be themselves wholly and authentically. In this he is welcoming to all even if it is uncomfortable. He also discussed how if anti-DEI bills pass in his state he and other DEI professionals will “rise up” and innovate ways to ensure DEI work advances. Zahir shared he will continue to educate students about DEI even if an anti-DEI bill passes that aims to dissolve DEI efforts in higher education. He will use free speech zones and leverage other networks to educate and “model the work” and teach students how to navigate spaces that are hostile or unwelcoming. Similarly, Zahir is going to “stand” on what he believes DEI means and he will continue to do the work to maintain these definitions in action. Dr. Monique will use DEI principles in non-designated DEI spaces. She and Zahir explained that DEI work is the entire institution’s job, not just the cultural centers. The participants’ understanding and implementation of DEI highlighted that DEI goes beyond concepts and institutional practices; for them DEI principles are employed in their personal lives as well. Put another way, if anti-DEI laws aimed at dismantling DEI offices, units, departments, and employees pass, the participants’ implementation of DEI will not change.

In revisiting Erik’s story about his center’s DEI presentations, he shared that based on the account of one person, all of Broadview State University’s DEI

presentations must go through a new approval process. The changes were made without an investigation or an institutional mediation process, for example, to address the concerns of the person who issued the complaint. The complaint is an example of a majoritarian narrative. Majoritarian narratives about DEI illustrates an othering of minoritized groups through campus initiatives that are presented as DEI efforts. Such narratives sustain “social locations of privilege and dominance” (Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 685). The DEI presentation policy change came from a system administrator – someone who has the social positioning to advance a majoritarian narrative detracting from DEI efforts. Conversely, Erik challenged the majoritarian narrative by “giving presentations and telling our students to be open to different thought processes and life lessons and cultures” and by modeling behaviors to his students that demonstrated how he was “walking the walk” and “talking the talk.” In addition, his push against the majoritarian narrative exemplified that the decision to drastically change the DEI presentations to milquetoast versions of what they once were is incongruent with assertations of moving higher education towards objectivity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). “Watering down” and “broadening” the content of the DEI presentations is a veiled attempt to appease the self-interest of lawmakers in Erik’s state who are against DEI (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Dr. Monique’s story about DEI initiatives being “Band-Aids” and her desire to implement DEI principles in her work, but not work in a DEI-designated space is also a form of resistance. She does not believe the current implementation of DEI at most higher education institutions is actually solving problems. To this end, she has agreed with the majoritarian narrative of dissolving these efforts; however, her rationale is different. In short, HEIs cannot “program” their way out of addressing systemic issues

that have historically and contemporarily disadvantaged and marginalized underrepresented groups at PWIs. Dr. Monique does, however, believe that certain minoritized groups do need specialized and nuanced support. Thus, she does see a need for identity-specific centers and the implementation of DEI efforts across every higher education unit, which is where her story diverges from the majoritarian narrative. Moreover, because higher education is still not an equitable, inclusive, or objective environment for *all* students over fifty years after the enactment of formalized DEI legislation at institutions that are hundreds of years old, “there's a lot of work to still be done” as stated by Dr. Monique.

In another example, Zahir and Dr. Monique detailed that their centers did not have definitions for DEI, mission statements, or values. The absence of these components under the banner of their centers highlighted the tension between the majoritarian campus narratives that presented the center/institution as equity focused entities. For instance, Zahir shared that one day the president walked by the center and did not “stick his head in here for one minute.” The president had, however, stated that he was committed to DEI. His actions were not in alignment with his statements. The president failed to engage with Zahir and his students in the BCC – a DEI designated space. In similar a vein, Dr. Monique experienced institutional barriers, some of which seemed to be especially prominent when she organized programs for Black students. One example of this was the Black owned food truck event. She encountered challenges with Flash U’s policies around what was permissible for internal campus units (e.g., permits, location reservations). Taken together, Zahir and Dr. Monique’s experiences were examples of the majoritarian narrative being in opposition to DEI in practice on their campuses. In

another view, contrary to their institutions, they had definitions of DEI and used their understanding of DEI to guide their work in their respective centers. This exemplified how their location as HESA practitioners who centered DEI in their work regardless of whether their cultural centers or institutions valued DEI in a way that was demonstrated through actions.

Another aspect of the participants' counternarratives is intersectionality. Although my study did not focus on examining intersectionality, the participants, and the students they serve have intersectional identities and the participants; work is intersectional. As such, the majoritarian attacks on DEI is harming intersectional groups of people. Each participant discussed how they work with queer students, for example. Erik shared that his office hosts LGBTQIA Month events, Dr. Monique shared that she coordinated programs for Black and queer students, and Zahir shared that the executive board of the Men of Color Initiative he advises includes queer students. Relatedly, state legislators have introduced and/or passed anti-LGBTQIA legislation. This bills and the programs Erik, Dr. Monique, and Zahir coordinate fall under the DEI umbrella and underscores that the most marginalized communities are under attack. White, cisgender heterosexual men are spearheading legislative processes that are pushing marginalized communities further into the margins. As such, anti-DEI efforts do not solely impact individuals and groups on the basis of race and ethnicity; thus, resistance against such policies and laws must be intersectional to effect change.

In amplifying the voices of Black cultural center staff members, I (re)presented stories that challenged majoritarian narratives about DEI. Detractors present DEI as euphemism for "nonwhite;" thus, it is taken as an affront by those in the majority. Yet,

the participants discussed how DEI initiatives span a broad spectrum of intersectional equity-focused work. Zahir explained how the X University Black cultural center can be engaged beyond the titular post of the programming space for Black folks. The center can be a part increasing student success, retention, and matriculation rates for Black students, if the university reimagined how it engaged with the BCC. Dr. Monique discussed how institutional politics can impact cultural centers. Thus, higher education institutions need not look too far to identify DEI detractors. Campus bureaucracies can shape how, when, or if DEI efforts are prioritized and implemented by institutions as well. As for Dr. Monique's point, if her state passes anti-DEI legislation, it will be up to the institutions and their legal counsels to interpret the law and determine how to enforce it because the law that was introduced is intentionally ambiguous. The ambiguity leaves room for majoritarian narratives to fester and inform how the law will be practiced. As an example, this is currently happening in the state of Texas as the higher education institutions grapple with how to comply with a state law that went into effect January 2024. The law bans DEI offices, diversity training for students, and "ideological oaths and statements" at public institutions (Bryant & Appleby, 2024).

The sensationalized conceptualization of DEI by the dominant group decenters underrepresented voices. This conceptualization demands underrepresented groups acquiesce to the whims of a political agenda determined to disband all forms of DEI in higher education. However, although some state legislators are seeking to repackage higher education as beacons of objectivity, meritocracy, and neutrality that no longer need DEI initiatives, research tells a different story. Scholars note that while institutions "value" and are "committed" to DEI work, how they implement these efforts can

maintain harm and be counterproductive for students, faculty, and staff. (e.g., Bazner, 2022; Briscoe, 2022b; Slay et al., 2019). Moreover, in considering how formalized DEI initiatives came to fruition in a nation with a historical legacy of racism and contemporary systemic racism issues, the stories about DEI at PWIs tell just enough as to not warrant a thorough examination of the structural, institutional, and systemic issues that situates underrepresented groups in the rungs of the higher education sphere to be perpetually stepped on (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

The counterstories of Erik, Dr. Monique, and Zahir are the lived experiences of three Black higher education and student affairs professionals who work(ed) in cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. The participants' stories pushed against majoritarian narratives about DEI by positioning their work as more than just "work." All of the participants believe in advancing DEI in ways that go beyond the confines of their cultural centers. DEI has various conceptions, definitions, and are not practiced the same across higher education. Likewise, the participants shared some understanding of DEI, in that they all plan to infuse DEI principles into any work they do in higher education. They also placed the principles of DEI such as valuing differences, being welcoming to all, being "helpers one to another," and supporting those in need as central parts of their ethos as HESA professionals and as individuals who are committed to social justice.

In summary, by examining the participants' stories through four CRT tenets, this study highlighted how cultural centers and their staff (a) work against the permanence of racism in higher education, (b) encounter whiteness as property, (c) reckon with converging interests in the cultural centers, and (4) provide counterstories to majoritarian narratives that position DEI as dangerous for higher education institutions. Next, I present

a summary of the study, implications for research and practice, and end with reflections/conclusion.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions during the anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion movement. Formalized DEI initiatives within predominantly white higher education institutions are over 50 years old. Federal legislation such as the Higher Education Act of 1965, student protests of the 1960s, and changing racial and ethnic demographics in the US and subsequently colleges and universities led to respond with mitigation efforts and support services. One such effort were the establishment of cultural centers. Cultural centers are higher education areas that generally work with underrepresented groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality) and provides social, cultural, educational, professional, and personal development opportunities for students.

The staff who operate the cultural centers are an under-researched group in the scholarship about these centers. Some research foci on cultural centers are the history and operations cultural centers (Patton, 2006a, Princes, 2005), students' experiences and engagement with cultural centers (Patton, 2006b; Patton, 2010; Hypolite, 2022; Hypolite, 2020a), and relevancy and activating cultural centers in the twenty-first century (Princes, 1994; Harris & Patton, 2016; Young, 2005). The inclusion of cultural center staff in research about the centers' operations or students' experiences confines their experiences as supplemental to that of the centers and students. There is a gap in the research that centers the staff who oftentimes hold one or more marginalized identity, work with marginalized groups daily, and who worked during a specific sociopolitical period

wherein their centers and their roles are being dissolved, challenged, and rendered counterproductive in higher education. Moreover, my study was designed to center cultural center staff as I sought to better understand how these staff members defined and implemented their work in such a charged political environment.

This study aimed to center the lived experiences of cultural center staff by amplifying their voices through storytelling to (re)present how their experiences shape their understanding of DEI and how they are addressing anti-DEI discourse and/or policies. In centering the voices of cultural center staff, I privileged stories that often go untold and highlighted their stories of resistance and resilience. This study answered the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff members within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?
2. How do these experiences shape staff members' DEI identity and work?
3. How does the current political environment, including anti-DEI policies across the United States inform, if at all, the work of DEI staff within cultural centers at predominately white institutions?

Narrative inquiry was the research methodology used in this study because it lends itself well to storytelling. Reissmann (2008) noted that narratives are used to study experiences and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experiences (p. 20). Narrative inquiry allows for participants' stories to be restoried using rich descriptions. In using this methodology, I was able to delve deeper into the participants' meaning making processes that stemmed from their experiences in their cultural centers and higher education more broadly.

Data were collected via a demographic questionnaire which was used to ensure potential participant met the criteria for participation and three semi-structured interviews. The data collection resulted in nine rich research texts (i.e., interview transcripts) that detailed the participants' stories about their time working in cultural centers at PWIs. Additionally, during the data analysis, I engaged in pre-analysis which consisted of cleaning each transcript manually, holistic content reading, analytic memos, and collaboration with the participants. I shared the transcripts, some analytic memos, and preliminary findings with the participants to maintain an open line of communication and to provide the participants the space to share their thoughts about my findings and the research process. It was important to me that I restoried the participants findings in ways that were true to them, so their collaborations were an important part of the data analysis process.

This narrative inquiry was guided by the theoretical framework, critical race theory and used the CRT tenet of counterstorytelling and critical race methodology as analytic frameworks. The salient CRT tenets used in my study were: the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and counterstorytelling (Capper, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In using CRT as my theoretical framework and as an analytic lens for the discussion of findings, I learned how the cultural centers and their cultural center staff are needed on predominantly white campuses as the occurrence of racist persist which illustrated a permanence of racism. Secondly, whiteness as property highlighted how cultural centers and their staff can be viewed as property interest for PWIs. The findings demonstrated that PWIs use, enjoy, and exert possession over the center and the work produced by the staff through, for instance, determining what types

of DEI presentations to offer on PWI campuses. In applying the CRT tenet of interest convergence, I learned how the center and staff can be commodified to suit the needs of an institution. Also, in privileging counterstories cultural center staff members' experiences were centered and challenged majoritarian narratives about DEI initiatives. This exploration into the lived experiences of cultural center staff highlighted the ramifications of anti-DEI legislation, as such CRT underscored how racism continues the legal system that informs higher education policy. Moreover, in using critical race methodology (CRM) I was able to amplify knowledge generated from "those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

Finally, I intentionally did not present the findings as themes. I chose to present each participant's story as a unique, individual, and lived experience that highlighted story elements such as conflicts, defining moments, and resolutions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Across the stories, however, I restoried the participants' career trajectories that led to their roles in their respective cultural centers; experiences and pivotal moments that led to the development of a DEI; and the counterstories that discussed how, if all, the sociopolitical climate informed their definition and understanding of their work within and outside of the cultural center.

Implications for Research

Zahir, Dr. Monique, and Erik had varied pathways to becoming diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals. Zahir and Erik believed that DEI work should persist in higher education, while Dr. Monique believed that DEI as it is currently implemented across the higher education sphere should be reimagined to include DEI principles into

every campus department. This study aimed to explore the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions. I chose to study this population because of the limited research focused on cultural center staff – the people who keep the centers in operation. The findings illuminate the disparate experiences of cultural centers staff as they are often viewed as resident "DEI experts" on campus, as such, other campus constituents relinquish the campus' DEI efforts to them, which is a heavy burden to bear. The findings led to implications for more research around cultural center staff wellbeing, cultural center staff as actors in student success, and disparate experiences of cultural center staff. Below I offer some implications for future research on and with this population.

The findings indicated that diversity, equity, and inclusion work, particularly when done by people with minoritized identities, is challenging to their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Future research is needed that studies how cultural center staff cope with working in a space that requires *all* of them and requires that they engage with issues that can traumatize or retraumatize them depending on the subject matter. Dr. Monique's situation with the Black students who were preparing for a protest being called "predators" by their peers is an example of how this work can impact cultural center staff members' emotional wellbeing. Likewise, when racialized incidents occur and garner national attention, cultural center staff are tapped by their students to extend support as was the case with Erik during the 2016 presidential campaign and the 2020 summer uprisings after the murder of George Floyd. It is important to study how cultural center staff cope with charged incidents. Moreover, the underpinnings of my study was the current political period wherein diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are

being dismantled, including DEI offices and DEI roles. Future research should interrogate how higher education institutions can better support the wellbeing of cultural center staff beyond "thank you emails." Moreover, the sudden dissipation of cultural centers and related offices across the US warrant investigation. What are the experiences of cultural center staff whose center/office was dissolved after the implementation of anti-DEI legislation? What stories of challenge do they have to share?

The perception of Zahir's center is starkly different than Dr. Monique and Erik's because his center was identity-specific. Future research could explore how cultural center staff experiences differ at identity-specific centers versus multicultural centers in the context of today's sociopolitical climate. For example, a study exploring the differences between institutions in red (conservative) and blue (progressive/liberal) states could also be a focus for future research. The findings in this study illuminated the differences in how cultural center staff approached politics. The participant at the private institution emphasized campus politics while the other two discussed state-level policy concerns. As such, examining the experiences of cultural center staff in private versus public institutions is an area for further research.

In addition, Zahir's story about the Black cultural center being perceived as the programming space for Black students could inform future research about how cultural center staff are activating their centers in ways that support student success, retention, and matriculation. This could amplify the work the center staff do as integral to student success and counter narratives that paint the centers as "nonessential" (Patton et al., 2019, p. 178). Future studies could also examine how interest convergence manifests with cultural center staff who are leading efforts to ensure everyone is included in spaces that

were designed for specific populations (e.g., BCC) as a challenge against the "nonessential" notion.

It would also be advantageous for future research to study the experiences of DEI professionals who work in cultural centers and related offices that restructured their offices as result of anti-DEI policies For example, what are the experiences of cultural center staff who work in restructured cultural centers? Pointedly, the introduction of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation has informed some higher education institutions' policies on DEI. This is another layer of cultural center staff experiences worthy of exploration. Some institutions have preemptively decided to eliminate DEI units and offices. What are the stories of staff that have transitioned from working in a cultural center to another area on campus? How have these changes shaped their perception, attitudes, or DEI identity?

Lastly, I did not intentionally recruit Black DEI professionals for study; however, considering all participants were Black an investigation of cultural center staff with different racial and ethnic identities would be fruitful because different communities have different experiences. One community that future research could center is Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Desi Americans (APIDA) who work in cultural centers because of the divide amongst those for and against affirmative action – a DEI initiative. Future research could examine how APIDA cultural center staff address the anti-DEI discourse/policies in their state and/or institutional changes to DEI work. Additionally, exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ staff in LGBTQIA+ resource centers could be another area for further research. This is especially poignant because during this period of anti-DEI, some states are also passing legislation that negatively impacts these

communities, effectively targeting specific populations that have initiatives under the DEI umbrella. In addition, while my study focused on DEI staff in cultural centers at predominantly white universities, future research should examine the experiences of DEI professionals in academic affairs, outside of the academy, and consider focusing on other intersectional experiences (e.g., first-generation student status, religion, etc.) that inform their work.

Implications for Practice

Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education institutions stretch back over 50 years to address inequities experienced by Students of Color and other marginalized groups. The extant literature in chapter two illustrates how these initiatives came to be (e.g., Foste et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2019; Thelin & Gasman, 2017; Wilder, 2013) and highlights a contemporary challenge: anti-DEI legislation. Interestingly, the study participants shared that their institutions in their current state have not implemented DEI principles into the fabric of every campus system and unit. These stories highlighted a dichotomy between espoused institutional commitments to DEI and DEI in practice. This necessitates an interrogation of institutional policies and practices. Notably, some of the policy changes occurred because of state law. In this light, many of the anti-DEI bills being introduced and passed are vague and left up to interpretation. At the local level, institutional administrators should be transparent with cultural center staff about how an anti-DEI law would impact their campus. Institutional leadership, board of trustees, and legal counsel for example, should highlight how, if at all, their institution can remain committed to DEI on their campus if these are principles that underscore their mission, values, goals, and vision. At an individual level, DEI professionals must decide if they

will stay or leave this work. Lange and Lee (2024) named DEI work as lifelong justice work. As such, the decision to stay or leave is an act of resistance pushing back against dominant ideologies.

Moreover, practicing “radical honesty” (Lange & Lee) will require DEI professionals to echo the sentiments of Erik, Dr. Monique, and Zahir regarding how they will continue to orient their work through a DEI lens, regardless of their environment. DEI professionals must determine their values and principles in relation to DEI and align their work with this value system to shield them from the potentially violent and exclusionary environments brought on by anti-DEI efforts (Lange & Lee, 2024). Radical honesty also requires that DEI professionals acknowledge how the work impacts their wellbeing. All of the participants shared the ways in which this work impacted either their mental, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual wellbeing. While DEI professionals can innovate ways to develop sustainable, equity-focused change, it cannot come at the expense of one’s health.

As the participants noted, there are various ways to do DEI work because it does not start and end within the confines of a cultural center or other related DEI designated space. Zahir explained that he would use free speech zones to educate students about DEI principles and discuss issues such as microaggressions and implicit/explicit bias. Dr. Monique noted she would use a DEI lens to account for the intersectional identities of her students. The participants exemplified that there are various ways DEI to advance DEI work without the banner of DEI. Interestingly, Lange and Lee (2024) argued that the ambiguity of the US legal system can work *for* DEI professionals. Instead of viewing the legal system from a deficit lens, Lange and Lee suggested DEI professionals use the

ambiguity as an opportunity to get creative. For example, some states have banned specific efforts (e.g., dissolving DEI units, ban funding for DEI initiatives) but many have provisions for student organizations. This means DEI professionals can assist in student organizations' DEI efforts. For example, practitioners can support students' demands and help them build networks across campus that are committed to DEI work. Bolstering bias incident reports, ensuring campus stakeholders know how and where to contact equal opportunity services and Title IX, for instance, are also ways DEI professionals can still do this work.

Reflecting on Dr. Monique's Band-Aid theory, institutions must begin to develop and sustain practices and spaces that are equity-focused and ingrained into the "DNA" of the institution. This looks like institutions remaining or recommitting to the goals of diversity, equity, inclusion, *and* justice to not only imagine but also create more just equitable campus communities and beyond. This work must extend past DEI practitioners and DEI designated spaces; we must build coalitions, develop communities of support, and provide opportunities for campus constituents across all backgrounds to engage with this work. This also looks like institutions reinforcing or creating support for practitioners who have DEI-facing roles as these individuals deal with a host of issues on campus in addition to their personal issues and national and world interests; as such, providing culturally responsive and trauma-informed care is imperative. Moreover, DEI professionals in higher education must also check their heart posture. Higher education's "one step forward, two steps back" nature evidences the constant cycle of action and reaction as Lange and Lee (2024) noted. If we are not mindful, this pattern will have us attempting to rebuild the house with the master's tools, as Lorde (1984) stated, if we

allow the sentiments about DEI to guide our work and infiltrate our value systems. I encourage DEI professionals to feel all the emotions – anger, hopelessness, anxiety, fear – let it out, but do not let it consume you. In the face of sweeping changes to the higher education landscape, we must resist the forces seeking to discount, discredit, dismantle, and dissolve DEI efforts.

Reflection and Conclusion

Although there is extant literature about cultural centers, there are few studies that focus on the cultural center staff experiences during transitional or defining periods. My study explored the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion staff in cultural centers at predominantly whites institutions; how and when these staff members developed a DEI identity; and their counterstories about how or if the current sociopolitical climate shaped the work they did in the center and beyond. This study emphasized the need for more research about and with cultural center staff in which they tell their stories from the frontlines of these centers.

The findings revealed that DEI is an identity that cultural center staff hold central to their personhood; DEI work does not begin and end in the cultural center – it should be an institutional goal that is reinforced by institutional policies and practices; anti-DEI laws will not guide how cultural center implement DEI principles; to do DEI work in this political climate is an act of resistance; and their stories generated valid, legitimate knowledge that added to the scholarship of cultural center staff. The findings also highlighted the cruciality of centering and amplifying the voices of staff in cultural centers, for their voices are far too often linked to their students or the centers as an

entity. Moreover, the theoretical framework of critical race theory underscored how race and racism played a role in the anti-DEI efforts across higher education.

In reflecting on my experiences in higher education and student affairs, I realized the seed that started this study was planted well before my first semester of my doctoral program – it was planted years earlier when I was a recent master's graduate. The thought of conducting research on cultural center staff stemmed from me feeling voiceless and lost trying to understand a new university landscape and campus politics. After completing this study, I feel validated and liberated. This process was cathartic – I was able to release emotions I had not allowed myself to acknowledge. The stories of Zahir, Dr. Monique, and Erik poured into my soul and edified me. The vulnerability encouraged me be comfortable in seeing myself as a part of this process and not solely as the "principle investigator."

This study also required me to reflect on my own identities in relation to DEI work. I am inspired by Zahir, Dr. Monique, and Erik's tenacity – they are determined to sustain DEI principles in their work, beyond any office and in spite of any law. Along this journey I learned I have the power to determine how I support an equity agenda and resist forces that are counter to my DEI identity – for it is *within* me and it does not begin nor end within the confines of a cultural center.

References

Abrica, E. J., & Oliver Andrew, R. (2024). The racial politics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1-11.

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Diversity in institutional life.* Duke University Press.

Apugo, D. (2021). Black women graduate students on whiteness and barrier breaking in leadership. *The Urban Review, 53*(3), 424–442.

Austin, Z., & Sutton, J. (2014). Qualitative research: Getting started. *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, *67*(6), 436.

Baber, L.D. (2015). Examining post-racial ideology in higher education. *Teachers College Record,* 117(14), 5-26.

Bankole, K. (2005). An overview of Black cultural centers in higher education. In F. L. Hord (Ed.), *Black cultural centers: Politics of survival and ident*ity (pp. 164–182). Chicago, IL: Third World Press.

Bazner, K. (2022). Views from the middle: Racialized experiences of midlevel student affairs administrators. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(5), 572-582.

Bell, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review, 93*(3), 518–534.

Bell, D. (1987). *And we will not be saved: The elusive quest for racial justice.* New York: Basic Books.

Benitez Jr, M. (2010). Resituating cultural centers within a social justice framework: Is there room for examining whiteness? In L.D. Patton (Ed.) *Cultural centers in higher education: Perspectives on identity, theory, and practice*, 119-134.

Berrey, E.C. (2011). Why diversity became orthodox in higher education, and how it changed the meaning of race on campus. *Critical Sociology, 27*(5), 573-596.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). *Racism without racists: Color-Blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (6th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

Bowman, N.A., & Park, J.J. (2015). Not all diversity interactions are equal: Cross-racial interaction, close interracial friendship, and college student outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 56,* 601-621.

Briscoe, K. L. (2022a). "Failing to respond:"Black graduate students' perceptions of a university president's responses to racialized incidents. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1-13.

Briscoe, K. L. (2022b). Student affairs professionals experiences with campus racial climate at predominantly white institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(5), 560–571.

Broadhurst, C.J., & Velez, A.L. (2019). Historical and contemporary contexts of student activism in US higher education. In D.L. Morgan & C.H.F. Davis III, (Eds.), *Student activism, politics, and campus climate in higher education* (pp. 3-20). Routledge.

Bruce, A., Beuthin, R., Sheilds, L., Molzahn, A., & Schick-Makaroff, K. (2016). Narrative research evolving: Evolving through narrative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *15*(1), 1-6.

Brunsma, D. L., Embrick, D. G., & Shin, J. H. (2017). Graduate students of color: Race, racism, and mentoring in the white waters of academia. *Sociology of race and ethnicity*, *3*(1), 1-13.

Bryant, J., & Appleby, C. (2024, April 3). *Anti-DEI Legislation tracker: BestColleges*. BestColleges.com. https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/

Bryant, J., & Appleby, C. (2023, June 21). *Anti-DEI Legislation tracker: BestColleges*. BestColleges.com. https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/

Butina, M. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science,* 28(3), 190-196.

Call Me Latine. (2022, September 17). Call me Latine. https://callmelatine.wordpress.com/

Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *25*(8), 652-661.

Capper, C. A. (2019). Critical Race Theory, Black Crit. In *Organizational theory for equity and diversity: Leading integrated, socially just education* (pp. 101–132). Routledge.

Case, A., & Ngo, B. (2017). "Do we have to call it that?" The response of neoliberal multiculturalism to college antiracism efforts. *Multicultural Perspectives, 19,* 215-222.

Chang, E.H., Milkman, K.L., Gromet, D.M., Rebele, R.W., Massey, C. Duckworth, A.L., & Grant, A.M. (2019). The mixed effects of online diversity training. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, 116*(16), 7778-7783.

Cineas, F. (2023, February 15). *Ron DeSantis's war on "woke" in Florida schools,*

explained. Vox. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23593369/ron-desantis-florida-schools-higher-education-woke

Clandinin, D. J., (2007). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Clandinin, D., & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative inquiry. In Lisa M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 542–545). Sage.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research.* Jossey-Bass.

Cliburn, E. (2023, April 18). *The war on DEI*. INSIGHT Into Diversity. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from https://www.insightintodiversity.com/the-war-on-dei/

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19,* 2–14.

Crenshaw, K W. (1988). Race, reform, retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in anti-discrimination law. *Harvard Law Review,* 101(7), 1331–1387.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989,* 139-167.

Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and the violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43,* 1241-1299.

Crenshaw, K., N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas. 1995. *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement.* New York: The New Press.

DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. D. (2004). “So when it comes out, they aren’t that surprised

that it is there:" Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher, 33*(5), 26-31.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review, 87,* 2411-2441.

Delgado, R. (1993). On telling stories in school: A reply to Farber and Sherry. *Vanderbilt Law Review, 46,* 665-676.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1993). Critical race theory: An annotated bibliography. *Virginia Law Review, 79,* 461-516.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: NYU Press.

de Novais, J. & Spencer, G. (2019). Learning race to unlearn racism: The effects of ethnic studies course-taking. *The Journal of Higher Education, 90*(6), 860-883.

Denson, N., & Bowman, N. (2013). University diversity and preparation for a global society: The role of diversity in shaping intergroup attitudes and civic outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education, 38,* 555-570.

DiAngelo, R. (2016). What makes racism so hard for Whites to see? *Counterpoints, 497,* 193-214.

Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. (2018). Where are we? Critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education, 93*(1), 121–131.

Dumas, M. J. (2016). Against the dark: Antiblackness in education policy and discourse. *Theory Into Practice*, *55*(1), 11-19.

Easley, J. S., & Williams Shealey, M. (2023). Anti-DEI and the future of higher education. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, *40*(10), 12-13.

Fenderson, J., Stewart, J., & Baumgartner, K. (2012). Expanding the history of the black studies movement: Some prefatory notes. *Journal of African American Studies*, *16*, 1-20.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. (2023a, January 31). *Governor Ron DeSantis elevates civil discourse and intellectual freedom in higher education* [Press release]. https://www.flgov.com/2023/01/31/governor-desantis-elevates-civil-discourse-and-intellectual-freedom-in-higher-education/

Foste, Z., Duran, A., & Hoooten, Z. (2022). Articulating diversity on campus: A critical discourse analysis of diversity statements at historically White institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education,* 1-15.

Foxx, K. (2021). Cultivating a sense of belonging: Black students at a predominantly White institution. *Negro Educational Review,* 72(1–4), 107–129.

Fuchs, H. (2020, October 13). *Trump attack on diversity training has a quick and chilling effect*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/us/politics/trump-diversity-training-race.html

Gans, J. (2023, June 29). *Thomas in rare occurrence reads affirmative action opinion from bench*. The Hill. https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/4073736-thomas-in-rare-occurrence-reads-affirmative-action-opinion-from-bench/

Garcia, G. A. (2016). Exploring student affairs professionals' experiences with the campus racial climate at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(1), 20–33.

Garcia, C. E., Walker, W., Morgan, D., & Shi, Y. (2021). Aligning student affairs

practice with espoused commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Journal of College Student Development, 62*(2), 137–153.

Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). Am I going crazy?: A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education,* 44(1), 93–114.

Gonzales, L.D., Hall, K., Benton, A., Kanhai, D., & Núñez, A-M. (2021). Comfort over change: A case study of diversity and inclusion efforts in U.S. higher education. *Innovative Higher Education, 46,* 445-460.

Gordon, L. (1990). *Gender and higher education in the progressive era.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Green, D., Pulley, T., Jackson, M., Martin, L. L., & Fasching-Varner, K. J. (2018). Mapping the margins and searching for higher ground: Examining the marginalisation of black female graduate students at PWIs. *Gender and Education,* 30(3), 295–309.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.). (2005). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvad Educational Review, 72*, 330-367.

Harris, C.I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review, 106*(8), 1-85.

Harris, J. C., Barone, R. P., & Davis, L. P. (2015). Who benefits?: A critical race analysis of the (d) evolving language of inclusion in higher education. *Thought & Action, 2015,* 21–38.

Harris, J. C., & Patton, L. D. (2016). The challenges and triumphs in addressing students' intersectional identities for Black cultural centers. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10*(4), 334–349.

Hefner, D. (2002). Black cultural centers: Standing on shaky ground? As college campuses become more diverse, many find the future of Black cultural centers in question. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 18*(26), 22–29.

Hernandez, E. (2007). Demanding social change at Indiana University: Latino student activism in the mid-1970s. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 9-21.

Hernández, F. (2019). Ethnic studies fifty years later: Activism, struggles, and lessons. *Ethnic Studies Review, 42*(2), 56–61.

Hikido, A., & Murray, S. B. (2016). Whitened rainbows: How white college students protect whiteness through diversity discourses. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 19,* 389–411.

Hill, R.L., Nguyen, D.J., Kilgo, C.A., Lange, A.C., Shea, H. D., Renn, K.A., & Woodford, M.R. (2021). How LGBTQ+ students thrive in college. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice,* 1–15.

Hoffman, G.D., & Mitchell, T.D. (2016). Making diversity "everyone's business:" A discourse analysis of institutional responses to student activism for equity and inclusion. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(3), 277-289.

Horowitz, H.L. (1984). *Alma mater: Design and experience in the women's colleges from their 19th century beginnings to the 1930s.* New York: Knopf.

Huber, L. (2008). Building critical race methodologies in educational research: Research note on critical race testimonio. *FIU Law Review, 4*(1), 159-174.

Hurtado, S., Milem, J.F., Clayton-Pederson, A.R., & Allen, W.R. (1999). Enacting diverse learning environments: Improving the campus climate for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Series, 26*(8). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hypolite, L. I. (2020a). "It just helps to know that there are people who share your Experience:" Exploring racial identity development through a Black cultural center. *Journal of Negro Education, 89*(3), 233–248.

Hypolite, L.I. (2020b). People, place and connections: Black cultural center staff as facilitators of social capital. *Journal of Black Studies, 51*(1), 37-59.

Hypolite, L.I. (2022). "We're drawn to this place:" Black graduate students' engagement with a Black cultural center. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education,* 15(1), 86-96.

Iati, M. (2021, May 29). *What is critical race theory, and why do republicans want to ban it in schools?* The Washington Post. https://www.washingto npost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools

Iftikar, J. S. (2016). Articulated racial projects: Towards a framework for analyzing the intersection between race and neoliberalism in higher education. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs, 3,* 145–157.

James, C. E. (2012). Students at risk: Stereotypes and the schooling of Black boys. *Urban Education,* 47(2), 464-494.

Jayakumar, U. (2008). Can higher education mee the needs of an increasingly diverse and

global society? Campus diversity and cross-cultural workforce competencies. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(4), 615-651.

Jayakaumar, U.M., Garces, L.M., & Park, J.L. (2018). Reclaiming diversity: Advancing the next generation of diversity research towards racial equity. In M. B. Paulsen & L.W. Perna (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 33, pp. 11-79). Springer.

Jenkins, S. (2007). *The real all Americans: The team that changed a game, a people, a nation.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Kelly, S. (2010). Qualitative interviewing techniques and styles. In: I. Bourgeault, R. Dingwall, and R. de Vries (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative methods in health research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kezar, A. (2010). Faculty and staff partnering with student activists: Unexplored terrains of interaction and development. *Journal of College Student Development, 51,* 451-40.

Kim, J-H. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Knox, L. (2023, June 21). *University of Arkansas dissolves DEI office*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/state-oversight/2023/06/21/university-arkansas-dissolves-dei-office

Köppe, T. (2014). Narrative events. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, *6*(1), 101-116.

Kupo, V. (2011). Remembering our past to shape our future. In *Multicultural student services on campus* (pp. 13-28). Routledge.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 7–24.

Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. (1995). *Toward a critical race theory of education*. Teachers *College Record*, *97*, 47-68.

Lanese, L. (2023, May 16). *IUC letter on SB 83 to state senator Jerry Cirino*. Inter-University Council of Ohio. https://iuc-ohio.org/2023/05/18/iuc-sb-83-to-senator-jerry-cirino/

Lange, A. C., & Lee, J. A. (2024). Centering our humanity: Responding to anti-DEI efforts across higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, *65*(1), 113-116.

Ledesma, M. C., & Calderón, D. (2015). Critical race theory in education: A review of past literature and a look to the future. *Qualitative inquiry*, *21*(3), 206-222.

Leonardo, Z. (2013). Critical race theory in education: On racial state apparatuses. *Race frameworks: A multidimensional theory of racism and education* (pp. 11-43). Teachers College Press.

Leong, N. (2013). Racial capitalism. *Harvard Law Review, 126*(8), 2151-2226.

Levine, D. (1986). *The American college and the culture of aspiration, 1915-1940.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lewis, K.R., & Shah, P.P. (2021). Black students' narratives of diversity and inclusion initiatives and the campus racial climate: An interest-convergence analysis. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14*(2), 189-202.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lindsay, G.M., & Schwind, J.K. (2016). Narrative inquiry: Experience matters. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research,* 48(1), 14-20.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches.* Crossing Press.

Margetts, A. (2015). Person shift at narrative peak. *Language, 91,* 755–805.

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage: Los Angeles, CA.

Matsuda, C. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *Yale Law Journal, 100,* 1329-1407.

Matsuda, M., Lawrence, C., Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. (1993). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

McCormick, R. (1990). *The Black student protest movement at Rutgers.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

McShay, J.C. (2017). Engaging students at the intersections through multicultural centers: An application of the culturally engaging campus environment model. *New Directions for Student Services, 2017*(157), 25-34.

Melamed, J. (2006). The spirit of neoliberalism: From racial liberalism to neoliberal multiculturalism. *Social Text, 24,* 1-24.

Milem, J.F. (2003). The educational benefits of diversity: Evidence from multiple sectors. In M.J. Chang, D. Witt, J. Jones, & K. Hakuta (Eds.), *Compelling interests: Examining the evidence on racial dynamics in higher education* (pp. 126-169). Palo Alto, CA: Standford University Press.

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand

Oaks, CA: Sage.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, M. A., & Saldaña., J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis. Los Angeles: Sage.

Milner, H. R., IV. (2008). Critical race theory and interest-convergence as analytic tools in teacher education policies and practices. *Journal of Teacher Education, 59,* 332–346.

Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, 305 U.S. 337 (1938).

Morris, S. (1968). Black Students revolt: extreme pride in their color, culture, education spurs unrest. *Jet*, *34*(5), 46–50.

Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. M. (2012). Delineating the ways that key institutional agents provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college. *Journal of College Student Development, 53,* 436 – 452.

Lu, A., Elias, J., June, A. W., Charles, J. B., Hall, E., Huiskes, H., Marijolovic, K., Roberts-Grmela, J., Schermele, Z., & Surovell, E. (2023, July 7). *DEI legislation tracker*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts?sra=true&cid=gen_sign_in

Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8,* 329–347.

Patton, L. D. (2006a). Black cultural centers: Still central to student learning. *About Campus, 11*(2), 2–8.

Patton, L. D. (2006b). The voice of reason: A qualitative examination of Black student perceptions of Black cultural centers. *Journal of College Student Development,*

47(6), 628–646.

Patton, L. D. (2010). On solid ground: An examination of the successful strategies and Positive student outcomes of two Black cultural centers. In L. D. Patton (Ed.), *Cultural centers in higher education: Perspectives on identity, theory, and practice* (pp. 63–82). Stylus Publishing.

Patton, L. D. (2011). Promoting critical conversations about identity centers. In P. M. Magolda & M. B. Baxter Magolda (Eds.), *Contested issues within student affairs* (pp. 255–260). Routledge.

Patton, L. D. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education, 51*(3), 315–342.

Patton, L. D., & Hannon, M. D. (2008). Collaboration for cultural programming: Engaging cultural centers, multicultural affairs, and student activities offices as partners. In S. Harper (Ed.), *Creating inclusive environments for cross-cultural learning and engagement* (pp. 139–154). Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrator.

Patton, L.D., & Jordan, J.L. (2017). It's not about you, it's about us: A Black woman administrator's efforts to disrupt White fragility in an urban school. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 20*(1), 80-91.

Patton, L.D., Sánchez, B., Mac, J., & Stewart, D.-L. (2019). An inconvenient truth about "progress:" An analysis of the promises and perils of research on campus diversity initiatives. *The Review of Higher Education, 42*(5), 173-198.

Pittman, E. (1994). Cultural centers on predominantly white campuses: Campus, cultural

and social comfort equals retention, last word. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 11, 104.

Pollack, T.M., & Zirkel, S. (2013). Negotiating the contested terrain of equity-focused change efforts in schools: Critical race theory as a leadership framework for creating more equitable schools. *Urban Review, 45*, 1-21.

Poussaint, A. (1974). The Black administrator in the white university. *The Black Scholar, 6*(1), 8–14.

Princes, C. D. W. (1994, March). *The precarious question of black cultural centers versus multicultural centers* (pp. 1–56). Harrisburg: Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Princes, C. D. W. (2005). The precarious question of Black cultural centers versus multicultural centers. In F. L. Hord (Ed.), *Black cultural centers: Politics of survival and identity* (pp. 135-146). Chicago, IL: Third World Press and Association of Black Cultural centers.

Renn, K. A. (2011). Do identity centers (e.g., Women's Centers, Ethnic Centers, LGBT Centers) divide rather than unite higher education faculty, students, and administrators? If so, why are they so prevalent on college campuses? In P. M. Magolda & M. B. Baxter Magolda (Eds.), *Contested issues in student affairs* (pp. 244–260). Routledge.

Riessman, K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rossman, G.B., & Rallis, S.F. (2012). *An introduction to qualitative research: Learning in the field* (4th edition). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Rogers, I. (2009). Remembering the Black campus movement: An oral history interview with James P. Garrett. *Journal of Pan African Studies, 2*(10), 30–41.

Rogers, I. (2012). The Black campus movement and the institutionalization of Black studies, 1965–1970. *The Journal of African American Studies, 16*(1), 21–40.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saldaña, J., & Omasta, M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Sanders, K. (2016). Black cultural centers: A review of pertinent literature. *Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals, 4*(1), 30–38.

Santa-Ramirez, S., & Wallace, J. K. (2022). We got work to do: Testimonios of queer Black and Latinx practitioner-scholar-advocates navigating the insider/outsider paradox within the ivory tower. In A. Duran, R. A. Miller, T. J. Jourian, & J. Cisneros (Eds.), *Queerness as being in higher education: Narrating the insider/outsider paradox as LGBTQ+ scholars and practitioners* (pp. 59–70). Routledge.

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). Personal, stance, positionality and reflexivity. In *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice* (pp.68-83). Routledge.

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). Interviews. In *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice* (pp.357-373). Routledge.

Schwartz, R. & Stewart, D.-L. (2017). The history of student affairs. In J. H Schuh, S. R. Jones, &, V. Torres (Eds.), *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (Sixth) (pp. 20-38). Jossey-Bass.

Shuford, B. C. (2011). Historical and philosophical development of multicultural student services. In *Multicultural student services on campus* (pp. 29-37). Routledge.

Size & setting classification. Carnegie classifications of institutions of higher education. (2023, March 30). https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/classification-methodology/size-setting-classification/#four-year-medium-primarily-residential

Slay, K. E., Reyes, K. A., & Posselt, J. R. (2019). Bait and switch: Representation, climate, and tensions of diversity work in graduate education. *The Review of Higher Education, 42*(5), 255–286.

Smith, D.G. (2009). *Diversity's promise for higher education: Making it work.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Snyder, T. D. (1993). *120 years of American education: A statistical portrait*. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1-115.

Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 24,* 5-19.

Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, racial and gender microaggressions, and the experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11,* 121-136.

Solórzano, D. G., & Delgado Bernal, D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance

through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education, 3,* 308-342.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *8*(1), 23-44.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2009). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 131–147). New York, NY: Routledge.

Squire, D.D. (2020). "It's pretty essential:" A critical race counter-narrative of faculty of color understandings of diversity and equity in doctoral admissions. *The Urban Review,* 52(1), 173-197.

Stephenson, M. & Tate, A. S. (2015). *Arts and community change: Exploring cultural development policies, practices, and dilemmas*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Stewart, J. B. (2005). Bridging time, space, and technology: Challenges confronting Black cultural centers in the 21st century. In F. L. Hord (Ed.), *Black cultural centers: Politics of survival and identity* (pp. 75-87). Chicago, IL: Third World Press and Association of Black Cultural centers.

Stewart, D.-L., & Bridges, B. K. (2011). A demographic profile of multicultural student services. Developing collaborations within student affairs. In Stewart, D.-L. (Ed.), *Multicultural student services on campus: Building bridges, re-visioning community* (pp. 38-60). Stylus.

Strayhorn, T. L., & Johnson, R. M. (2014). Why are all the white students sitting

together in college? Impact of Brown v. Board of Education on cross-racial interactions among Blacks and whites. *The Journal of Negro Education, 83*, 385–399.

Strayhorn, T. L., Terrell, M. C., Redmond, J. S., & Walton, C. N. (2012). “A home away from home:” Black cultural centers as supportive environments for African American collegians at white institutions. In M. C. Terrell & T. L. Strayhorn (Eds.), *The evolving challenges of Black college students: New insights for policy, practice, and research* (pp. 122–137). Stylus Publishing.

Sutton, E. M. (1998). The role of the office of minority affairs in fostering cultural diversity. *College Student Affairs Journal, 18,* 33–39.

Sweatt v. Painter, 339 U.S. 629 (1950).

Tabachnick, C. (2023, June 30). *What is the higher education act -and could it still lead to student loan forgiveness?*. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-the-higher-education-act-and-could-it-still-lead-to-student-loan-forgiveness/

The Conversation. (2023, April 11). *Tracking the attack on critical race theory in education*. U.S. News & World Report. https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2023-04-11/tracking-the-attack-on-critical-race-theory-in-education

The Education Trust. (2023, October 3). *How colleges’ anti-DEI policies affect campus racial climate*. The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/issue/how-colleges-anti-dei-policies-affect-campus-racial-climate/

Thelin, J.R., & Gasman, M. (2017). Historical overview of American higher education. In

J. H Schuh, S. R. Jones, &, V. Torres (Eds.), *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (Sixth) (pp. 3-19). Jossey-Bass.

Tichavakunda, A. A. (2022). University memorials and symbols of white supremacy: Black students' counternarratives. *Journal of Higher Education*, *93*(5), 677–701.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Civil Rights Division. (2023, October 3). https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI

Towe, J. (2023, August 15). *50 Black baby names and meanings for boys*. Parents. https://www.parents.com/names-for-black-baby-boys-6500047

Townsend, C. V. (2021). Identity politics: Why African American women are missing in administrative leadership in public higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership,* 49(4), 584–600.

Truong, K. A., Museus, S. D., & McGuire, K. M. (2016). Vicarious racism: A qualitative analysis of experiences with secondhand racism in graduate education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*(2), 224–247.

Vianden, J. (2018). "In all honesty, you don't learn much:" White college men's perceptions of diversity course and instructors. *International Journal on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 30,* 465-476.

Wallace, J. K., & Ford, J. R. (2023). Returning home: Reflections on cultural capital cultivated for Black men faculty through multicultural affairs work. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1-14.

Warikoo, N.K. (2016). *The diversity bargain: And other dilemmas of race, admissions, and meritocracy at elite universities.* University of Chicago Press.

Waxman, O. B. (2023, April 6). *Data shows the anti-CRT movement isn't over: Exclusive*. Time. https://time.com/6266865/critical-race-theory-data-exclusive/

West, N. M. (2015). In our own words: African American women student affairs professionals define their experiences in the academy. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal, 35,* 108–119.

Wilder, C.S. (2013). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Williams, D. A. (2005). Seven recommendations for highly effective senior diversity officers. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 22*(7), 53.

Williams, D. A., & Clowney, C. (2007). Strategic planning for diversity and organizational change. *Effective Practices for Academic Leaders*, *2*(3), 1-16.

Willig, C. (2001). *Qualitative research in psychology: A practical guide to theory and method.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Wilson, R. (2005). Past their prime? After 35 years on campuses, Black studies programs struggle to survive. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 51*(33), A9.

Wood, S. (2023, August 18). *DEI bans at colleges: What students should know*. U.S. News & World Report. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/dei-bans-at-colleges-what-students-should-know

Wright, S. (1988). Black colleges and universities: Historical background and future prospects. *Virginia Humanities, 14*, 1-7.

Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*(1), 69-91.

Young, L. W. (1986). The role minority student centers play on predominantly white

campuses. *Handbook of minority student services*, 14-22.

Young, L. W. (2005). Black cultural centers and Black studies: Links, lines and legitimacy. In F. L. Hord (Ed.), *Black cultural centers: Politics of survival and identity* (pp. 147–150). Chicago, IL: Third World Press.

Appendix A

State and DC	Number of Bills Introduced	Signed Into Law
Alabama	2	1
Alaska	0	0
Arizona	4	0
Arkansas	1	0
California	0	0
Colorado	0	0
Connecticut	0	0
Delaware	0	0
District of Columbia	0	0
Florida	3	2
Georgia	1	0
Hawaii	0	0
Idaho	3	1
Illinois	0	0
Indiana	3	1
Iowa	4	0
Kansas	3	1
Kentucky	2	0
Louisiana	2	0
Maine	0	0

Maryland	0	0
Massachusetts	0	0
Michigan	0	0
Minnesota	0	0
Mississippi	1	0
Missouri	13	0
Montana	1	0
Nebraska	1	0
Nevada	0	0
New Hampshire	0	0
New Jersey	0	0
New Mexico	0	0
New York	0	0
North Carolina	2	1
North Dakota	1	1
Ohio	3	0
Oklahoma	4	0
Oregon	1	0
Pennsylvania	1	0
Rhode Island	0	0
South Carolina	4	0
South Dakota	0	0
Tennessee	3	1

Texas	7	2
Utah	4	1
Vermont	0	0
Virginia	0	0
Washington	0	0
West Virginia	2	0
Wisconsin	4	0
Wyoming	2	1

Appendix A. Anti-DEI Legislation by State as of April 2024.
Note. This table does not reflect bills that have been tabled, failed to pass, vetoed, or are in the state of final legislative approval.

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Text Script

Hi, [insert name] –

It’s Tika. I hope this message finds you well. I am contacting you to extend an invitation to you to participate in my dissertation study about the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions.

As a participant you will be required to participate in three individual virtual or in-person interviews with a duration of ~60-180 minutes.

I will follow-up this message with an email with more details about my study and criteria to participate. Please review the email at your earliest convenience and be sure to complete the basic demographic/eligibility questionnaire (completion time ~3 minutes). If you have any questions, feel free to contact me via phone or email at ljh2p@umsystem.edu.

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: Recruitment Email for Dissertation Study on Cultural Center Staff

Dear [insert name] –

My name is Tika Johnson, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Missouri in the College of Education and Human Development. I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation study about the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions. Participants of this study will be asked to participate in three 60-180-minute individual virtual interviews and member check-ins (review of preliminary data for accuracy) across three months. The selection criteria for participants is outlined below:

- identify as a diversity, equity, and inclusion professional
- employment within a Black cultural center or multicultural center at a predominately white institution
- have a minimum of one year experience working in a cultural center
- identify with one or more underrepresented identity such as racialized groups (e.g., Black, Latine, Asian American), gender diverse groups (e.g., transgender, non-binary), or diverse sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual)

If you are interested in participating, please follow this link to complete a demographic questionnaire and ensure you meet the participation criteria. Upon completion of the questionnaire, I will email you an informed consent form and contact you to schedule your three one-on-one interviews.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. If you have questions or would like to request further information, please contact:

Tika Johnson, PhD Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
University of Missouri
ljh2p@umsystem.edu

Dr. Lisa Dorner, PhD, Dissertation Chair
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
University of Missouri
dornerl@umystem.edu

Appendix D

Demographic and Eligibility Questionnaire

Section 1 – Criteria to Participate

1. I identify as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional (someone whose work includes DEI efforts)
   - Yes
   - No
2. I am currently employed in a Black cultural center or a multicultural center at a predominately white institution.
   - Yes
   - No
3. I have at least one year of experience working in a cultural center at the time of this study.
   - Yes
   - No
4. I identify with one or more underrepresented groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality)
   - Yes
   - No

Section 2 – Demographic Information

This information will only be used by the primary researcher and are relevant for the study. All responses will be kept confidential and anonymized. Note: for any question requesting a short answer, if you prefer not to disclose specific information, please write "prefer not to say."

Participation in this study will involve three (3) 60-180-minute virtual one-one interviews.

1. Name (first, last)
   - [insert short answer]
2. Preferred name (if different from above)
   - [insert short answer]
3. Email address
   - [insert email]
4. Pronouns
   - [insert short answer]
5. What type of center do you work in?
   - Black cultural center
   - Multicultural center
6. What is your racial identity?
7. What is your ethnicity?
   - [short answer]
8. What is your gender identity?

- [short answer]

9. Age
   - [insert short answer]
10. What is the name of your institution?
    - [short answer]

Appendix E

Recruitment Flyer

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Exploring the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions

Participation Includes

- Confirm you meet the participation criteria
- Read and review informed consent
- Complete basic demographic questionnaire
- Participate in three (3) individual virtual interviews (~60-180 minutes per interview)

Participant Criteria

- Identify as a diversity, equity, and inclusion professional
- Currently employed within a Black cultural center or multicultural center at a predominately white institution
- Have a minimum of one year experience working in a cultural center
- Identify with one or more underrepresented groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation)

Questions?

If you have questions about this research study, please contact the principal investigator, Latika Johnson at ljh2p@umsystem.edu.

Interested in participating? Scan the QR code below and complete the basic demographic questionnaire.

Appendix F

Informed Consent

Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Cultural Center Staff at Predominantly White Insituttions

Principal Investigator/Researcher: Latika Johnson

Advisor: Lisa Dorner, PhD

IRB Reference Number: 2099864

Overview
You are being invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to explore how cultural center staff at predominately white institutions make meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion and address anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within higher education. You are being asked to share stories about your experiences working in a cultural center at a predominantly white institution.

Your participation will include completing a basic demographic questionnaire to confirm you meet the study criteria, reviewing the informed consent , participating in three individual interviews (~ 60-180 minutes). Your participation is expected to begin when you agree to participate in this study until April 2024. This timeframe includes involvement associated with reviewing transcripts and member checking (review of data and findings for accuracy). If your involvement is needed beyond April 2024, a new consent form and agreement to participate will be drafted to continue your involvement.

Benefits of this Study
There is no direct benefit, compensation, or costs associated with your participation in this study. Your decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors. Findings from this study will benefit the field of higher education, specifically staff and in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide administrators with information to better support staff in the midst of shifts and legislative action concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education.

Risks Associated with this Study
There are no known legal, physical, or other risks associated with this study. Risks associated with this study are believed to be minimal. In each interview you will be asked to answer questions about previous and current experiences working in cultural centers. There may be potential moments of discomfort as you reflect on previous and current experiences. Please note that at any moment, you can stop, pause, or refuse to answer a question(s). With your permission, I will also record (audio/visual) the interviews via

Zoom videoconferencing and take notes to capture your responses in their totality and to ensure accuracy.

Confidentiality

The information you provide will be kept confidential and only I, the primary investigator, will have access to this information. I am committed to keeping your personal information private and will make every effort to maintain confidentiality, except where required by law. I will keep the audio and visual recordings confidential by excluding identifiable information from the file names; keeping the recordings private and relistening and rewatching the recordings in private; and encrypting the recordings with a code that only I will have the ability to access and decode on a personal password-protected laptop. In the findings section of this study, I will remove all identifying information and assign you and any other identifiable elements such as your institution a pseudonym to provide anonymity and prevent identifiable information from being disclosed.

Information collected from you for this study may be used for future research. In the event this information is used in future studies, any identifiable information will be removed before any information is shared. As such, I will not ask you for additional informed consent.

Questions or Concerns

If you decide to participate in this, you can change your mind and withdraw from this study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from this study, please email me at ljh2p@umsystem.edu detailing your intent to withdraw.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at (ljh2p@umsystem.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

Appendix G

Interview One Protocol

Greetings and overview purpose of study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of cultural center staff at predominantly white institutions with an emphasis on experiences with addressing changes to center operations over time. Essentially, I would like to learn about how you are navigating working in a diversity, equity, and inclusion space in this current political environment. Today, I will ask various open-ended questions to allow for the conversation to flow organically between us. I will also ask you follow-up questions for clarity or to encourage you to provide deeper explanations if needed. As a reminder, this interview will be recorded, and the audio will be saved to a password-protected laptop for future review. Upon completion of this study, the audio will be permanently erased.

Lead off question: Tell me about yourself.

1. Please describe your career trajectory (excluding your current role).
    a. Tell me about your career trajectory, accentuating pivotal moments that have informed your professional role(s) thus far.
2. Share a story about your first diversity, equity, and inclusion role (DEI) (inside or outside higher education).
    a. Tell me a story of triumph or challenge from your first DEI role.
3. Describe the path that led to your current role in the cultural center. Share how your goals, struggles, and the actualization of your career aspirations developed and/or changed along this path.
    a. How long have you worked in the cultural center? How long have you been at your institution?
    b. What led you to pursue a position in DEI?
    c. What led you to your current institution?
    d. Please detail any experiences you had with cultural centers prior to accepting your position.
4. Tell me about the work you do in the cultural center. (professional)
    a. Describe your responsibilities. Describe the roles/responsibilities of other cultural center staff (professional and graduate student employees).
    b. How do you decide what types of events, programs, or initiatives to offer or facilitate for your campus community?
    c. What excites you about your position? What frustrates you about your position?
5. How do your expectations for your position differ from your current experiences?
6. How do you describe your work in the cultural center? (personal)
    a. How do you define your work as it relates to working with individuals and groups with underrepresented and marginalized identities?
    b. Tell me a detailed story about a specific event/program you and/or your center hosted that encompasses how you described your work.

7. What are your experiences working within a cultural center at a predominantly white institution?
    a. How would you describe the role of the cultural center on your campus?
    b. What are some successes of the cultural center?
    c. What are some challenges facing the cultural center?
8. How would describe your experiences with students, staff, faculty, administrators, and community members in relation to the work of the cultural center?
9. Tell me about an experience in the cultural center that was especially successful or especially challenging for you.
    a. Did you feel prepared to address this challenge? If so, how? If not, please explain.
    b. What support, if any, did you receive to help you through this time?
10. Would you like to share any additional stories about your experience working in a cultural center?

Appendix H

Interview Two Protocol

1. How do you identify?
2. How do your identities inform your view of cultural centers?
    a. Please detail how your work in the cultural center intersects with your identity/identities.
    b. How do your identities guide your work in the cultural center?
3. Would you say you have developed a “DEI identity”?
    a. If yes, could you tell me about that?
    b. How has that identity developed over time, from your first position until your current position?
4. How do you define the concepts of DEI?
5. How does your cultural center define DEI?
    a. How would you describe your center’s DEI efforts? Share a story that demonstrates how your cultural center defines DEI?
    b. How would you describe your work in the cultural center in relation to your definition of DEI. (i.e., how would you locate your center in relation to DEI efforts)
6. How does your institution define DEI.?
    a. Do your cultural center and institution’s definitions of DEI align with your definition? If so, how? If not, please explain.
7. How do you think your understanding of DEI shapes the work you do in the cultural center?
8. Share a vivid memory of when you *knew* you wanted to be a DEI professional.
    a. How, if at all, does your current role elicit the same feelings/thoughts you had when you decided to become a DEI professional?
9. Would you like to share any additional stories about your DEI identity or work?

Appendix I

Interview Protocol Three

1. Please share your personal philosophy of cultural centers.
    a. Detail a story of triumph and challenge of your philosophy of cultural centers in action.
2. In interview one, you said [insert quote] regarding the role of the cultural center on your campus. Widening the lens, please share your perspective of the role of cultural centers at-large at predominantly white institutions?
3. In [insert state], [insert number bills] have been introduced to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education institutions.
    a. How, if at all, has the current political environment changed or challenged your:
        i. philosophy of cultural centers
        ii. definitions of DEI
4. Think about the current political environment surrounding DEI and related topics. How are the changes in the political landscape regarding DEI shaping your work in the cultural center?
5. How is your cultural center addressing challenges related to the current political environment?
    a. Share a detailed personal narrative about how your institution and cultural center confronted challenges to DEI.
    b. How, if at all, has your institution and cultural center's definition and practice of DEI shifted considering anti-DEI discourse and policies?
6. How does the political discourse about DEI make you feel?
    a. Has this significantly impacted your approach to your work in the cultural center? If so, please tell me how you are processing and navigating these feelings. If not, please explain.
    b. In what other ways have anti-DEI discourse and policies – specifically those targeting defunding DEI efforts – challenged you:
        i. Mentally
        ii. physically
        iii. spiritually
7. What changes, if any, have been made within the last four years to your cultural center's:
    a. operations (daily work)
    b. mission
    c. values
    d. goals
8. What strategies has your center employed to address these changes?
    a. Describe how, if all, these strategies have (re)shaped your:
        i. philosophy of cultural centers
        ii. understanding of DEI in practice
9. How has your institution's administration supported or constructed barriers for your center in addressing these changes?

   a. What other supports could your institution provide to best assist the mission, goals, and work of your center?

10. How would you imagine a cultural center differently to reflect your philosophy of cultural centers and understanding of DEI at a predominately white institution?
    a. Share a story from your time in your current cultural center that illustrates your imagined version of a cultural center.
    b. What word comes to mind when you think about a cultural center in this way? Why?
    c. How would *this* center (re)shape your perspective of cultural centers?
11. Are there any more stories you would like to share? (probe for additional stories across all three interviews)

Appendix J

Transcript Excerpt – Zahir Interview Three

Tika: So, what I'm hearing from you is you want your students – who interact and engage in your culture center – to know that these are some expectations I have of the students who participate in the programs that are housed under the center. These are things you should know as a budding professional, as a budding businessperson or, you know, an entrepreneur or a professional, like whatever it is… there is a time and place for certain attire. So, be sure, we are presenting ourselves in ways that express how we want to be addressed…

Tika: This…does spark a lot of interesting questions in my mind because… what does it say to our Black students who are [participating] in your center? We're telling them, hey, you have to… we're saying, hey, you present yourself in a certain way because you're already counted out.

Zahir: Yep.

Tika: You're already looked at kind of sideways because you're in this predominantly white space where we have predominantly white faculty, predominantly white peers, [you live in a] predominantly white city, don't give them any reason…

Zahir: Yep.

Tika: To count you out.

Zahir: Yep.

Zahir: That's exactly what I tell them. Don't give them a reason. Like, the first thing they see is your appearance. So, they going to judge you based off what you have on honestly.

Tika: Also, they're going to judge you by your appearance as well – I'm talking about your actual appearance.

Zahir: Yeah.

Tika: How are you groomed or not? And I'm hearing you say, you are really working with your students to understand, yes, you can be your authentic self, but also know where you are, know what you are going to be up against. I want you to realize that you're insulated here in the cultural center. We be Black all day! For us by us.

Zahir: Yeah.

Tika: Throwing it back to FUBU. Like yeah, when you step in [the cultural center] like you know what's up. Wakanda Forever [hands balled into fists; wrists crossed right over left across the upper chest signaling the 'Wakanda Forever' symbol].

Zahir: [Laughing]

Tika: I mean that [laughing]… But like, no, seriously the cultural center evokes the same energy, like you can feel it!

Zahir: [Nodding head yes]

Tika: Like when you walk in the cultural center like this is home. This is… this is for us. This is *our* space. However, when you step outside of the confines of the cultural center, you in a different… you in a different *environment*. And you want your students to know you're going to have to navigate the politics of being at a PWI and part of that is presentation; a part of that is ensuring that you don't give not nan person a reason to question your presence here.

Zahir: Yeah.

Tika: You belong here.. I felt it in my soul.

Zahir: You get it.

Vita

Latika Johnson is a native of Jacksonville, Arkansas. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies with emphases in leadership, health, and disaster preparedness and emergency management from the Arkansas State University; a Master of Science in College Student Personnel Administration from the University of Central Arkansas; and a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis with an emphasis in higher education and a concentration in leadership and administration from the University of Missouri- Columbia.

Latika's higher education and student affairs experience began as a paraprofessional during her undergraduate studies, where she served on many executive boards for student organizations and as an ambassador and student director for various institutional initiatives. She parlayed her paraprofessional experience into her graduate assistant role at her master's institution in the diversity office. Her professional experience in higher education and student affairs include working in diversity, equity, and inclusion, multicultural affairs, student affairs, and off-campus and commuter student services. In her future endeavors she plans to continue advancing a social justice agenda by pursuing educational, research, and employment opportunities in support of these efforts.