

ABSTRACT

MABERRY, TODD EDWIN. *Humanizing Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Senior Administrators at Predominantly White Institutions in North Carolina* (Under the direction of Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach).

The purpose of this study is to provide guidance for senior administrators in higher education who recognize leadership disparities and inequities that exist for women and people of color, and who have the desire to do something about them. The study explored the experiences of senior administrators (n=9) at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in North Carolina who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining systems that perpetuate disparities in leadership, specifically a lack of gender and racial representation, as well as discrimination and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators. The study was guided by a conceptual framework that employs Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, Intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's (2020) justice and equity framework for administrators. It was also guided by an advisory group comprised of four current senior administrators who identify as women and/or people of color.

The research method of this dissertation was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The data collected was nine semi-structured interviews and twenty-four additional artifacts, which included three policy documents, twelve news articles featuring the work of research participants, one podcast transcript, four published journal articles, and four transcripts or summaries of community conversations. Out of the application of IPA to the data, five group experiential themes emerged. The overarching theme is *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset*. The primary way the participants in this study are confronting leadership disparities in higher education is by thinking and acting like a good human and applying that mindset to the systems within their influence. The specific and practical

approaches are highlighted in the theme *Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*. The senior administrators are also humanizing higher education by *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans*. The findings reveal the significant challenges these senior administrators are experiencing, which are narrated in the themes of *Pressures of the Political Climate* and the *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*.

The humanizing and empowering way the research participants are approaching their work is summarized four key takeaways and the implications for policy, practice, and research. Those four takeaways include the significant potential of a humanizing mindset to move higher education forward, the need to develop and adapt resilience tactics to persist in the work, the requirement of understanding and adapting to a specific context to humanize higher education, and the necessity of experiencing community to effectively build community.

Keywords: senior administrators, higher education leadership, humanizing higher education

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Humanizing Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Senior
Administrators at Predominantly White Institutions in North Carolina

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Crystal Lee (d. 2025), who embodied humanizing higher education.

BIOGRAPHY

Todd Edwin Maberry inherited a legacy of good work from farmers and people of faith. Born and raised in rural Illinois, he became a first-generation college student by attending Olivet Nazarene University. A lifelong learner, he also has a Master of Divinity from Duke Divinity School and a Master of Public Administration from North Carolina State University. He is an administrator with pastoral skills and a pastor with administrative skills. An ordained clergy person, he has been a pastor at all kinds of different churches around the United States. As a higher education leader, he has worked in Academic, Admissions, and Financial Aid offices, and has also managed a research center.

His research interests include higher education leadership, the intersection of faith and community development, philanthropy, and an assortment of other topics relating to higher education and faith communities.

He is married to his lovely wife, Laura, and is the father of two beautiful daughters, Monika and Julena.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Institutions of higher education in the United States seek to serve and educate an increasingly diverse student body and the senior administrators of higher education are not representative of that growing diversity. A change is currently taking place where a growing number of people minoritized by race and gender are in positions of higher education leadership (Lederman, 2022); however, that change is not happening quickly enough for senior administrators to be representative of enrolled students anytime in the coming decades (Melidona et. al, 2023). Additionally, the experiences of minoritized people in senior administrative roles reveal additional layers of challenge in multiple forms of discrimination (Kincade, 2023; Gonzalez, 2024; Sparkman, 2021; Townsend, 2021). The current moment calls for leadership that can address, dismantle, and reimagine higher education systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education (Kezar & Posselt, 2020; Melidona et. al. 2023, Espinosa et. al, 2019).

The Association for the Study of Higher Education website defines diversity as the range of identities “across race, ethnicity, tribal/Indigenous affiliation, national origin, citizenship status, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion and the intersections across these identity markers” (ASHE website, 2024, paras. 2). Higher education includes people who embody all aspects of this diversity definition. A growing portion of the higher education community is recognizing the reality that senior administrators are not representative of the higher education community, particularly when it comes to race and gender (Melidona et. al. 2023). Higher education is currently experiencing a contradictory and contentious moment where

the calls for diversity, equity and inclusion in leadership are growing louder at the same time as attempts to extinguish diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are dramatically increasing.

The current climate of higher education is a challenging context, rife with political tension, financial and enrollment pressures, and significant demand for outcomes. The present financial, political, and organizational challenges of higher education require effective senior administrators. Adding to these challenges is one that is often overlooked: senior administrators are not representative of the student populations they seek to serve (Kezar & Posselt, 2020; Melidona et. al. 2023, Espinosa et. al, 2019).

This study will define senior administrators as “key decision-makers invested with authority who work collectively to achieve the goals of the institution” (Kezar et al., 2020, p. 103). In higher education, senior administrators are typically the presidential cabinet and include administrators with roles such as president, vice president, provost, and dean. This study will also use the terms ‘leader’ and ‘administrator’ interchangeably. An administrator is a specific role within an institution, whereas leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2021, p. 6). While the leadership capacity and skills among senior administrators vary greatly, all higher education senior administrators are leaders in the sense that they influence the institution through their oversight of people and resources.

While the challenge of systems that create disparities and inequities for senior leaders exists in every area of higher education, this study will focus on predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that are four-year private and public institutions of higher education in North Carolina. Scholars are calling for race-conscious discussions of leadership in PWIs and the need for people of color to have better access to senior leadership positions (Sparkman, 2021; Webster & Brown,

2019). Additionally, PWIs also create access barriers for women in leadership, particularly women of color (Hotchkins, 2017; Townsend, 2021). The reason for the narrow focus of four-year PWIs in North Carolina is to have a manageable starting point for data collection, as well as access to networks that made it possible to complete this study. For the past fifteen years, I have served as a higher education administrator at a four-year private PVI university in North Carolina, and my experiences and network assisted me in completing the study. This study focuses on the experiences of senior administrators who are working within North Carolina PVI higher education systems that perpetuate disparities and inequities for senior administrators minoritized by race and gender.

Problem Statement & Recent Studies

Representation matters. Numerous studies from the 2010's have shown how higher education institutions suffer from a lack of representation among senior administrators and make the case for more diversity in senior leadership (Braun et al., 2009; Wolfe & Freeman, 2013; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Rodriguez & Valle, 2016); yet the problem persists. One way of measuring an appropriate level of representation among senior leadership is to determine whether the identities of senior administrators mirror those of the overall community. Presently, a noticeable gap exists between the gender and racial identities of senior administrators and student populations. According to the most recent data, a majority (58%) of students enrolled in higher education are women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), yet only 33% of college presidents are women (Melidona et. al, 2023). For additional context on this gender disparity, in the United States, 50.5% of the total population identifies as female, and 49.5% identify as male (United States Census Bureau, 2025).

Additionally, people of color were underrepresented among higher education administrators in comparison to U.S. graduate degree holders. Of the 15.4 million undergraduates enrolled in 2021, 50.6% (7.8 million) identified as White, while 49.4% (7.6 million) identified as a race or ethnicity other than White. The largest minoritized group includes those who identify as Hispanic at 3.3 million or 21.4% of the total (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). In 2022, people of color represented 18% of senior higher education administrators, yet they held 31% of U.S. graduate degrees (Fuesting, 2023). For additional context on this racial/ethnic disparity, in the United States, 57.8% of the total population identifies as White, 18.7% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 12.1% identify as Black or African American, 5.9% identify as Asian, and 5.5% identify as another race, ethnicity or a combination of race/ethnicities (United States Census Bureau, 2025). A higher percentage than the general population of people who identify with a race/ethnicity other than White are enrolled in higher education, yet they occupy a smaller percentage of the overall senior administrators in higher education.

It is difficult to find full demographic information on the identities of senior higher education administrators, and currently, only reliable information on race and gender identities exists. I have yet to discover any information that summarizes the national origin, citizenship status, class, sexual orientation, disability, and age range of senior administrators in higher education. Additionally, disparities related to access to higher education for women and people of color have been a persistent challenge since the beginning of higher education in the United States. Despite significant attention to this challenge over the past several decades, women and people of color are still underrepresented in senior leadership roles and continue to experience

discrimination. Therefore, this study focuses on the disparities and inequities that exist in relation to race and gender.

A lack of representation not only has moral and ethical implications; it is also a factor in why higher education institutions fail to flourish. While difficult to quantify, some research has demonstrated a correlation between higher levels of gender and racial representation among senior leadership and the effectiveness of the organization (Hunt et. al., 2015; Hunt et. al., 2018). Some recent research has demonstrated the value of involving diverse perspectives in decision-making processes (Donovan & Caplan, 2019; Gero & Garrity, 2018; Williams, 2013; Woolley & Malone, 2011). For example, there is little correlation between a group's collective intelligence and the IQs of its individual members, but if a group includes representation of women, the collective intelligence of the group rises (Woolley & Malone, 2011). Organizations that have clear strategies for diversity and inclusion at senior leadership levels see higher rates of talent acquisition, employee retention, and an environment where employees can be more productive (Donovan & Caplan, 2019). A lack of representation limits the potential of higher education as institutions of human flourishing.

The most pressing disparities in higher education disproportionately impact women and people of color. For example, American Indians were the least likely of any other racial group to attend a four-year institution, attend a very selective college, or pursue a bachelor's degree (Espinosa et. al, 2019, p. xiv). Higher education needs leaders who notice this lack of representation and know how to address this disparity. Higher education also needs leaders who notice disparities that disproportionately impact minoritized groups. For example, Black students graduate with the highest levels of student loan debt of any group (Espinosa et. al, 2019). Given this disparity, Black leaders need to be involved in making decisions about tuition, scholarships,

and other support structures to help mitigate against higher debt levels as their experiences and perspectives will enhance an institutions ability to design solutions to these challenges. While most higher education degree recipients are women, men are employed as professors at a much higher rate (Fan & Sturman, 2019). Therefore, higher education needs leaders who are on faculty search committees and are working to ensure the pool of potential faculty members has adequate representation. It is naïve and moving towards a colonialist mindset to assume that leadership teams overrepresented with White men will be able to adequately address higher education challenges that disproportionately impact women and people of color.

In addition to minoritized people being underrepresented in senior administrative roles, those who do occupy them tend to experience additional challenges in the form of discrimination specifically related to their race and gender. Researchers are increasingly bringing this discrimination to light. For more than fifteen years, scholars have raised the need for more women in leadership positions, as well as support for women who currently occupy those positions (Madsen, 2011; Teague, 2015; Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Bartels, et. al., 2021; Khosrow-Powell, 2021; Pothuraju & Alekhya, 2021; and Seruya et al., 2021, etc.). Approximately fifteen years ago, scholars (Madsen, 2011; Teague, 2015) were sounding the alarm bells that intentional intervention is needed to increase the number of women in higher education leadership roles. Despite many organizations, including higher education, expressing public commitments to diversity in leadership representation, higher education has been “stymied in achieving measurable results” (Madsen & Longman, 2020, p. 14).

Recent scholarship continues to illuminate the challenges that women face in seeking leadership opportunities while also moving in the direction of solutions. A few years ago, a survey of women leaders revealed that time demands and concerns about increasing workloads

are the top concerns women have when seeking leadership advancement. The survey also offered some solutions, such as intentional succession planning, leadership development, and policies to support work-life balance (Seruya et al., 2021). Other solutions include addressing gender bias in the faculty tenure and promotion process (Bartels et al., 2021) and creating new models for mentoring women into leadership positions (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018). While recent researchers are beginning to move toward identifying solutions (Bensimon et al., 2020), a noticeable gap is amplifying the work of leaders who are effective in dismantling the systems that perpetuate these leadership disparities and inequities.

Higher education in the United States was originally designed for wealthy, White men. The first higher education institution in the United States, Harvard, opened in 1636 and only enrolled White men from the wealthy elite. Before 1800, no record exists of a woman earning a college degree. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that higher education institutions began whose purpose was to enroll groups like women and people of color who had been previously excluded (Thelin, 2019). For many years, institutional policy prohibited many women and people of color from even enrolling in higher education institutions. Eventually women and people of color did obtain access, but the overall systems and structures were not completely reset. Higher education has attempted to adapt, but no revolution has happened that has caused the entire system to be restructured. This legacy of exclusion and discrimination persists despite attempts to change.

The voices and experiences of racially minoritized people are a focus of the most recent studies on higher education leadership. In the early 2020s, a flurry of studies was published focused on the voices and experiences of Black higher education leaders (Sparkman, 2021; Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Townsend; 2021; Chance, 2022, etc.). These studies reveal the

additional challenges that Black leaders face such as overcoming stereotypes and negative perceptions (Sparkman, 2021), the struggle to find mentors (Thacker & Freeman, 2021), microaggressions (Townsend, 2021), as well as lack of respect, tokenism, and isolation (Chance, 2022). Scholarship that centers the voices of Latino/a/x is beginning to emerge, revealing similar experiences that Black higher education leaders face, such as overcoming stereotypes and a lack of respect (Burmicky, 2024b; Ortega et al., 2023). During my review of the literature, I came across numerous dissertations that focused on the experiences of various racial and ethnic groups, such as Asian Americans, as well as those with minoritized sexual identities and gender expressions. Given that dissertations are often the seeds of future publications, I expect a coming wave of peer-reviewed studies that will center an increasingly diverse pool of senior leaders. Prioritizing the voices of marginalized individuals is a crucial initial step, and further research is required to comprehend the strategies for mitigating the disparities and inequities. I provide an overview of dissertations focused on elevating the voices of minoritized administrators in the literature review.

A recent example of the challenges and scrutiny that women senior administrators—and in particular Black women—face in their roles is the fallout of the congressional hearings that took place near the end of 2023. The United States House Committee on Education and the Workforce held a congressional investigation into allegations of antisemitism on the campuses of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania. The three university presidents, all of whom were women, appeared before the committee to respond to allegations of antisemitism in a highly contentious environment (Herszenhorn & Yuan, 2023). The hearings created an enormous backlash, and one repercussion was the resignations of University of Pennsylvania President Liz McGill and Harvard President Claudine Gay. Gay was Harvard's first Black president. She

resigned a little over six months into her tenure, which was the shortest tenure of any president in Harvard's history (Haidar & Kettles, 2024). Gay resigned in the face of enormous pressure, particularly from donors and alumni. Bill Ackman, a billionaire investor and Harvard alumnus, claimed on social media that Gay would not have been considered for the presidency if it were not for the “fat finger” on the diversity scale (Mangan, 2024). Gay was previously the dean of Harvard's largest faculty and highly qualified for the role of president. Attacks on her being merely a “diversity hire” were false and inflammatory (Mangan, 2024). This tragic story highlights the extra layers of scrutiny women and people of color—particularly Black women who lead at these intersections—endure in senior leadership roles.

While recent studies and stories help illuminate the disparities and inequities that exist, literature has a dearth of guidance on how to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems within higher education that perpetuate disparities and inequities among minoritized people. These previous studies are necessary for naming the problems associated with a lack of representation in senior leadership roles and the discrimination minoritized people face. The present moment calls for more research on the ways that senior leadership can participate in transforming higher education to ensure a greater representation of people can flourish in senior leadership roles.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to provide guidance for senior administrators who aspire to promote racial and gender equity in higher education but are not sure where to start. It will be vital to have higher education leadership that can address, dismantle, and reimagine practices that perpetuate leadership disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. This work is ongoing, and

one way to accelerate it is to amplify the efforts of senior administrators who have been effectively doing this work.

Research Questions

The racial and gender disparities within senior higher education leadership are a significant problem that will require individual, institutional, and systemic change. The history of gender and race in the United States inextricably links to the multifaceted underlying reasons for this problem. The current moment calls for a deeper understanding of the experiences of senior higher education administrators in relation to this problem. Therefore, I completed a phenomenological study of senior administrators who are directly engaging in this problem in a way that is recognized as effective by their minoritized peers. Institutional and systemic change happens when a group of individuals leads in an intentional direction. At present, the literature has a small amount of research on next steps for individuals who are aware of the problem and aspire to play a role in leading change. And no previous study exists that explores the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity. This study sought to understand the experiences of the individuals engaged in this work, as well as the policies, processes, and strategies they are utilizing for this work. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, processes, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

The goal of this study was to identify themes in the behaviors and actions of senior administrators who others, particularly women and people of color, recognize as making progress in doing this work. The themes can be condensed and summarized into pragmatic guidance for other higher education leaders who want to contribute meaningfully to this challenge and are unsure of where to start or what to do.

Conceptual & Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study rests on the assumptions that both representation and leadership matter. Leadership matters because higher education leaders have primary influence over the strategic direction of their institutions and oversee the allocation of resources. External factors such as federal and state policies, economic trends, and global events also impact the direction of higher education institutions, though this study focused on senior administrators and the role that they play. Representation also matters, as I discussed previously, and this study aims to address the lack of representation among higher education senior administrators as well as the discrimination faced by current minoritized administrators. Therefore, the conceptual framework guiding this study blends leadership theory and critical theory together with a new equity and justice framework.

The leadership theory this study utilized is the Leadership-Membership Exchange (LMX) Theory. When looking at the experiences of senior administrators in higher education, LMX can help us understand how they find and change institutional systems and practices that keep minoritized administrators from having equal opportunities. LMX Theory describes an “in-group” and “out-group” for explaining why some people receive opportunity while others do not (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX Theory seeks to understand the impact a leader has on people and organizations. It is a relational approach that investigates the “quality

of exchange relationships, or dyads between formally assigned leaders/supervisors and their subordinates, and the consequences of different types of exchange relationships in terms of the attitudes and behaviors of subordinates” (Van Breukelen et. al, 2006, p. 297).

This study is also informed by the critical theory of intersectionality, which is a central concept in Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought has roots dating back to the mid-1800’s with early leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Frances Ellen Watkins, who expressed early Black feminist perspectives. Black feminist thought gained momentum in the mid-20th century, as Black women leaders like Angela Davis, Pauli Murray and bell hooks began to criticize the exclusion of their experiences in both the Civil Rights and mainstream feminist movements (Smith, 2013). This Black feminist thought leadership laid the groundwork for the concept of intersectionality.

The specific term “intersectionality” emerged out of the scholarship of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who addresses the problematic consequence of viewing “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). In her work, Crenshaw points out that the experiences of White women and men of color can be both parallel and distinctive from the experiences of women of color. Intersectionality provides a way to understanding that all oppression is linked. It is the study of “overlapping social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.139). Intersectionality reveals how identity markers like race and gender do not exist independently of each other and that each informs the other to create a complex convergence of oppressions. The benefit of this framework is that it takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyze societal structures of power (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) continued developing the concept of intersectionality in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins argued that centering Black women and other marginalized groups opens possibilities for creating new paradigms. Intersectionality has the potential to both explain and transform systems of inequality (Mays & Ghavami, 2018). Intersectionality is seen as the “signal contribution of feminist studies” (Cole, 2009, p.171) and is an idea that is utilized in feminist scholarship across disciplines like psychology, sociology, and political science (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005; Risman, 2004). Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) posited that intersectionality can be:

usefully framed as representing three loosely defined sets of engagements: the first consisting of applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics, the second consisting of discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and the third consisting of political interventions employing an intersectional lens (p. 785).

This study utilizes intersectionality, drawing from the first and third engagements.

Intersectionality provided a lens to understanding why disparities exist, gave language to this oppression, and helped explain why senior administrators are needed to disrupt the current systems.

Studies utilizing LMX routinely find that “leaders are more inclusive and communicative with some members compared to others” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015, p. 3). While LMX was first theorized back in 1975, it is experiencing growing attention in academic literature as most LMX mentions (more than 1,000 total) in journal articles have been within the past ten years (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015). It is only recently that scholarship has considered diversity together with LMX (Goldberg & McKay, 2015). This study applied the critical lens of intersectionality to LMX

theory. For example, LMX theory and intersectionality helped explore whether senior administrators who are effective at addressing systems that perpetuate disparities and inequities for minoritized senior administrators were a part of an “in-group” for a woman and/or person of color. Blending these theories also allowed me to explore the ways these effective senior administrators include women and people of color in their “in-group.”

Finally, this study uses the recent framework developed by Kezar and Posselt (2020) for higher education administrators who wish to use their jobs to create equity and justice. This equity and justice framework has seven key components, which are “1. Clear definitions of equity and justice 2. Mindful administrative practice 3. Wisdom in judgment 4. Critical consciousness about power 5. Knowledge of self and positionality 6. Student centeredness 7. Routinizing mindfulness and wisdom.” (Kezar & Posselt, 2020, p. 6). The framework starts from the premise that administrators do not begin their careers with the intention of perpetuating inequity, and they need to take intentional action to foster equity and justice in higher education. This framework is relatively new and there has not been a study to assess its usefulness. This framework guided the interview questions and during the data analysis stage, supported the trustworthiness of the data.

Combined, these two theories and the equity and justice framework are the lens through which I conducted this research. Kezar and Posselt’s (2020) framework heavily influenced the research questions of this study. The first research question is to understand the experiences of senior administrators who theoretically may be following Kezar and Posselt’s (2020) framework, whether they are aware of it or not. Their experiences will be influenced by LMX theory and intersectionality. The second research question is more practical and is directly influenced by Kezar and Posselt’s (2020) framework. The two theories and the equity and justice framework

heavily influenced the research design and played a prominent role in construction of the interview protocol. Finally, this conceptual framework also helped to focus the data collection from the interviews, guided the analysis of the data, and served as a lens to interpret the findings.

Significance

This study is significant in that it will contribute to the emerging field of scholarship that is centering the voices of senior higher education leaders and is a response to the call for more research on how leaders can effectively practice anti-racist and anti-sexist leadership (Tevis & Foste, 2022). Substantial research has highlighted the discrimination women face in higher education leadership roles, accompanied by a call for more support of women in leadership roles (Madsen, 2011; Teague, 2015; Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Bartels, et. al., 2021; Khosrow-Powell, 2021; Pothuraju & Alekhya, 2021; and Seruya et al., 2021, etc.). More recent studies center those with minoritized racial identities (Sparkman, 2021; Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Townsend; 2021; Chance, 2022, etc.). However, these studies are heavily focused on revealing the challenges that exist for minoritized leaders. While awareness is the first step toward addressing a challenge, the current scholarship does not provide significant clarity or guidance on next steps for senior administrators to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems that lead to disparities. More recent studies (Patton & Biondi, 2015; Tevis & Foste, 2022; Mathew et. al., 2023) do focus on the actions of White senior higher education administrators, though those articles are more focused on ways in which White leaders inadvertently and intentionally perpetuate inequities and disparities. Some work (Kezar & Posselt, 2020; Bensimon et al., 2020, etc.) do provide guidance, though they do not center the experiences of senior administrators. More studies are needed to understand the experiences of senior administrators and provide guidance for how senior

administrators can be effective in working toward equity and justice. This study seeks to add to the knowledge base of effective actions senior administrators can take.

This study can also add important contributions to the application of theoretical frameworks. It is a rare study that applies a critical lens (i.e. intersectionality) with a leadership theory (i.e. LMX). Effective leaders in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society need to have multiple lenses to see their institutions clearly, and this study provides examples of leaders who are doing this work well. Additionally, Kezar and Posselt's (2020) equity and justice framework for senior administrators offers a foundational guide for administrators striving for equity and justice. However, a deeper exploration of this theory in the context of current senior administrators' experiences is necessary. This study provides the first known attempt to use this framework for understanding the work of dismantling systems that perpetuate inequities and disparities for minoritized senior administrators.

Finally, this study combines theory with practice and the experiences of senior administrators who are presently doing this work. The findings of this study have the potential to influence the actions of current and future senior administrators who aspire to create cultures and environments that are equitable, particularly for minoritized senior administrators. It provides examples and a pathway for doing this important work. This study also has the potential to impact higher education policy, including policies that shape hiring processes for senior administrators, work environments, and human resource procedures.

Methods Overview

This study utilized qualitative methods, specifically phenomenology. Phenomenology is the type of qualitative inquiry that reveals the meaning of individuals lived experiences to understand a concept or phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 1984). The phenomenon

being explored in this study is the experiences of senior administrators who are recognized by their peers for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate racial and gender disparities and inequities in higher education leadership. Specifically, I employed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach as outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022). IPA provides the opportunity to explore more personal perspectives on the phenomenon. It does not merely look at the phenomenon on a surface level. Rather, IPA seeks to understand how the phenomenon is experienced by individuals. It produces an account of experiences on their own terms rather than through presumption or preconception. It is an idiographic method, which allows for examining detailed experiences on a case-by-case basis before moving to more general terms. IPA is a particularly helpful research tool for topics that are more complex, ambiguous, or emotionally laden (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Using IPA as a method provided me as a researcher with rich and distinct data that can examine the work being done to advocate for representation, equity, and justice in higher education leadership. Exploring this work is a relatively new area of inquiry, and IPA allows for maximum flexibility in understanding this phenomenon on its own terms.

I recognize my positionality as a White man, which means I do not have first-hand experiences with racism and sexism, both in higher education and as a member of society. I practiced reflexivity through self-reflection, journaling, and being attentive to feedback. I agree with scholars who name the problem of centering White men in this work (Mathew et. al, 2023). To move away from my voice being the only voice in this research, I constructed an advisory group to oversee my research comprised of women and/or people of color. This advisory group included four other minoritized senior administrators who provided additional layers of accountability in addition to my dissertation committee. The non-committee members are current

North Carolina senior administrators in higher education who identify as women and/or people of color. To acknowledge their time and contribution, I obtained grant funding to compensate them at \$500 per advisory group member.

The advisory group consisted of senior administrators with more experience in higher education than myself, and they possessed additional networks and connections that I lacked. This group made recommendations for participants to invite to the study by identifying senior administrators who demonstrate an aptitude for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems that perpetuate racialized and gendered disparities and inequities. With those recommendations, I extended invitations to senior administrators to participate in semi-structured interviews, some of which took place in person, and others which took place on Zoom. After the interviews, I followed the IPA protocol of Smith and Nizza (2022) to analyze the data, distill the data into group experiential themes, and from those themes to create an executive summary guide. Consistent with IPA, I carefully analyzed each interview transcript on its own before moving to the next one. IPA encourages multiple rounds of coding and distillation of data into broader themes. Once the study was completed, I gave my advisory group the power to affirm, reject, or adjust any of the group experiential themes that surfaced from the phenomenological study. The feedback from the advisory group added trustworthiness and additional credibility to my findings and informed my discussion of the findings in chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter offered an introduction and overview of a study on senior higher education administrators who are known for being effective in addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the systems that perpetuate inequities and disparities for minoritized senior leaders. The chapter introduced the topic, stated the problem, gave a purpose statement and research

question, and then provided an overview of the conceptual framework, methods, as well as the significance of the study. The next chapter will provide a review of the current literature to illuminate the recent research and the meaningful gaps that still exist, as well as the theoretical and conceptual framework for the study. The third chapter is a deep dive into the IPA qualitative method that guided this study. The fourth chapter shares the results of the study and the five group experiential themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. The fifth and final chapter is a discussion of the findings, its implications for higher education, and recommended next steps.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A growing body of research is giving notable attention to the need for greater diversity within senior leadership in higher education and the problem that a lack of representation poses to higher education. Research has long established that effective leadership is vital for higher education (Bensimon & Neumann, 1992; Braun et. al., 2009; Melidona et. al, 2023).

Approximately ten years ago, Wolfe and Freeman (2013) named the lack of representation among senior higher education leaders as “one of the most important ethical dilemmas facing colleges and universities today” (p. 1). Since the representation problem has not been resolved, the stakes are higher today. Specific research on higher education leadership started to proliferate in the latter half of the 2000’s (Braun et. al., 2009). In the 2010’s, a growing number of researchers applied the critical lenses of race and gender to specifically explore the need for more diversity in higher education leadership. Within the past few years, a growing trend is studies (Burmicky, 2024a; Chance, 2022; Madsen, Townsend, & Scribner, 2019) that center the voices and experiences of people with minoritized identities senior administrative roles in higher education.

This literature review is necessary to lay the foundation for a study focused on senior administrators who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the systems that perpetuate a lack of representation in senior leadership roles and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators. The research questions at the heart of this study are:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

2. What policies, processes, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

Important to the effectiveness of this study is to narrate the factors that have led to disparities in representation among senior administrators, as well as illuminate the inequity experienced by administrators minoritized based on their race and gender.

This literature review will provide an overview of the studies and the scholarship emerging in approximately the last ten years that center the voices and experiences of people with minoritized identities. I will highlight key research on the gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. I will also provide an overview of critical perspectives on administrative leadership and advocacy. Finally, I will discuss my theoretical framework and demonstrate its alignment with recent literature. I narrowed my literature review by only including peer-reviewed studies or published books that focus on higher education leadership that have been published within the past ten years.

Gender Disparities and Higher Education Leadership

Significant scholarship exists that names the disparities between men and women in senior higher education leadership. Men hold more senior leadership positions in higher education than women; a basic disparity that is well documented (Melidona et. al, 2023; Gray, Crandall, & Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2016). This section will provide the latest in academic scholarship on the lack of women leaders in higher education, the disparities women experience in higher education roles, and the most recent attempts to address those disparities.

For approximately the last thirty years, a commonly held myth is that there were simply not enough women in the pipeline to senior leadership, and growing the number of women in the

lower levels of the higher education hierarchy would eventually lead to more women at the top levels. However, this “pipeline problem” theory was challenged by leadership scholars Kellerman and Rhode (2017) who concluded that despite women obtaining a clear majority in higher education enrollment, “the number of women in positions of leadership and management has remained dauntingly and depressingly low” (p.11). For the last fifteen years, women have earned most degrees at every level, from associates to doctorates, and therefore, the “population of well-educated candidates for leadership roles has not been dominated by men” (Madsen & Longman, 2020, p. 14).

While the “pipeline problem” theory fails to explain the lack of women representation in senior higher education leadership, the reasons for the lack of representation and the discrimination women experience in leadership roles are multi-layered and multi-faceted. The lack of representation is an issue that includes various systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Despite the increasing number of women obtaining higher education degrees, their presence in leadership roles remains disproportionately low and the women who are in leadership positions routinely experience gender discrimination. This phenomenon can be attributed to several interdependent factors, including societal expectations and cultural norms, gender stereotypes, lack of mentorship, and institutional barriers that perpetuate inequality.

Societal Expectations and Cultural Norms

While the “pipeline” includes a significant number of women sufficient to fill leadership positions, some scholars describe a "leaky pipeline" effect, which exacerbates the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within higher education. This “leaky pipeline” term refers to the gradual attrition of women from academic careers at various stages, particularly during the transition from graduate studies to faculty positions and subsequently to

leadership roles (Adamo et al., 2022; Alomair, 2015). Factors contributing to this phenomenon include a lack of supportive policies, inadequate work-life balance, and the overwhelming responsibilities that women often bear in both professional and personal spheres (Caldarulo et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2012). For instance, studies have shown that women frequently face more demanding family obligations when compared to their peers who are men. The demanding and disproportionate family obligations can hinder the career progress and leadership aspirations of women (Nguyen, 2012; Jali et al., 2021).

Moreover, women leaders frequently encounter work-life balance challenges that can impede their professional development. The expectation to fulfill both professional and personal responsibilities can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction (Bradshaw, 2024; Norander & Zenk, 2023). Studies have shown that women often take on a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, which can limit their availability for leadership roles and professional networking opportunities (Alsubhi et al., 2018; Bradshaw, 2024). This dual burden not only affects their career trajectories but also their mental health and overall well-being (Mayer et al., 2014; Bradshaw, 2024).

In many cultures, including higher education in the United States, leadership is still viewed through a patriarchal lens, which can discourage women from aspiring to or accepting leadership roles (Zhao & Jones, 2017; Issa & Melhem, 2023). This cultural bias can manifest in various ways, including the undervaluation of women's contributions and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles that prioritize caregiving over professional ambition (Wu & Bao, 2013; Qin et al., 2019). Addressing these societal perceptions requires a concerted effort from both educational institutions and the broader community to challenge stereotypes and promote the

value of women in leadership roles. The next section will elaborate on gender stereotypes women in leadership positions experience.

Gender Stereotypes in Leadership

One significant barrier to women's advancement in higher education leadership is the persistence of gender stereotypes that associate leadership qualities predominantly associated with men. Research indicates that traditional models of leadership are often male centered, which can marginalize women leaders and their leadership styles that tend to be more transformational and inclusive (Lamm et al., 2021; Young & Pemberton, 2017). This bias can lead to a lack of recognition and support for women in leadership roles, as they may be perceived as less competent or authoritative compared to their counterparts who are men (White et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2019). The familiar concept of the "glass ceiling" is a common way to describe this barrier, where women find it challenging to ascend to higher leadership positions despite their qualifications and capabilities (Bruckmüller et al., 2014).

Research indicates that women often face discrimination in hiring and promotion processes, which contributes to their underrepresentation in leadership positions. For instance, studies highlight that women are frequently perceived as being less effective in leadership compared to their colleagues who are men, and this perception is the most tangible way the "glass ceiling" impacts women's advancement in leadership positions (Cañas et al., 2019; Black-Chen, 2017; Hannum et al., 2017). This phenomenon is compounded by cultural expectations that often associate leadership with masculine traits, which can marginalize women in higher education leadership roles who do not conform to these stereotypes (Akbar et al., 2023; Alsubhi et al., 2018).

Lack of Adequate Mentoring

Additionally, women in higher education leadership roles often experience a lack of mentorship and support, which can lead to disparities in career advancement. Women often lack access to mentorship opportunities that are crucial for career advancement in academia (Hill & Wheat, 2017). Many women feel isolated and unsupported in their leadership development, particularly in environments dominated by men (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2023; Hannum et al., 2017). This lack of mentorship can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and contribute to the impostor syndrome, where women doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as frauds (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Kanatova, 2023). The absence of role models further perpetuates this cycle, as fewer women in leadership positions means less visibility for aspiring women leaders (Hannum et al., 2017; Redmond et al., 2016; Chen, 2024).

Institutional Barriers

Furthermore, institutional policies and practices can either support or become a barrier to women's advancement in leadership roles. Many universities still operate within traditional frameworks that do not prioritize gender equity in leadership selection processes (Watton et al., 2019; Burkinshaw et al., 2018). The lack of transparent criteria for leadership appointments often results in the perpetuation of existing biases, where candidates who are men are favored over equally qualified women candidates (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Kanyumba & Lourens, 2022). Institutions must develop and enforce policies that promote gender equity in leadership recruitment and retention, ensuring the inclusion and support of women in their leadership development (Bensimon et al., 2020; Arquisola, 2020; Godier et al., 2020).

In summary, the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership is a complex issue rooted in systemic barriers, cultural stereotypes, and institutional practices. To

promote gender equity in leadership roles, it is essential for universities to implement supportive institutional policies, foster mentorship opportunities, and challenge societal norms that limit women's aspirations. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, higher education institutions can create a more equitable landscape that empowers women to take on leadership roles and contribute to the advancement of academia. The next section will review the attempts that have been made to address these disparities in higher education.

Attempts to Address the Disparities in Representation and Experiences

Many studies in the past few years have offered strategies for addressing the problem of disparities in senior administrative roles for women (Madsen, Townsend, & Scribner, 2019; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Selzer & Robles, 2019; Longman, et.al, 2019). Some of them focus on what women can do on an individual level by identifying themselves as aspiring leaders, creating time for career assessment, and seeking a network of influential and developmental relationships (Selzer & Robles, 2019; Longman, et.al, 2019). Others describe strategies for other senior administrators to follow. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) say that the problem with current efforts to promote women into leadership is that they tend to only focus on one or a few barriers. They list micro (e.g., work-life conflicts, communication styles), meso (e.g., lack of sponsorship, discrimination), and macro (e.g., gender stereotypes, scrutiny) barriers and suggest multilevel solutions to deal with them, like changing the whole work culture (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). This present study seeks to identify those who are engaging in multilevel solutions and are effectively implementing them.

Institutions have attempted the strategy of Intentional mentoring for women to address the disparities experienced by women leaders in higher education. Institutions that actively promote mentorship programs and create networks for women can significantly enhance their

leadership development and visibility within the academic community (Marshall et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2021). However, mentorship alone is not enough. Institutional mentoring programs must also recognize “the myriad invisible and unaccounted for structural barriers to [women’s] success, and collectively dismantle them” (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018, p. 14).

In summary, Susan Madsen, one of the leading scholars in this area, wrote in 2020 the following status update regarding women’s leadership in higher education:

An impressive body of research has documented the status of women in college and university leadership, and advances in leadership roles, strategies, and best practices have narrowly opened the gates for women to serve as leaders in higher education; however, substantial barriers remain, and practices based on conscious and unconscious bias still dominate. Yet, higher education has much to gain by identifying, preparing, and advancing more high-potential women into leadership roles. (p.21)

This study aspires to be a response to this call to remove barriers for women in leadership roles by highlighting the senior administrators who recognize this problem and are making strides to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems that perpetuate these disparities for women.

Racial Disparities and Higher Education Leadership

Race and leadership in higher education intersect within a landscape where systemic inequities and structural barriers continue to limit opportunities for individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds. Higher education institutions in the United States have historically been, and continue to be, predominantly White spaces, which has led to persistent underrepresentation of racially minoritized people in senior leadership positions. Although there is increasing recognition of the value of diverse leadership, leaders with a minoritized racial background frequently encounter challenges that reflect broader societal patterns of exclusion,

racism, and tokenism. These leaders often find themselves not only advocating for their own advancement but also working to dismantle systemic barriers for others, emphasizing the critical need for institutional reform. This section overviews the recent academic literature that is centering the voices of Black, Latinx/a/o, and other minoritized leaders.

Experiences of Black Leaders in Higher Education

Researchers of higher education are actively building awareness of racial disparities among senior higher education leaders by focusing on the voices and experiences of people with marginalized racial identities. The group featured most often in the academic literature are those who identify as Black or African American. The earliest study I could find was by Mosley (1980) who looked at Black women working in PWI's and described this group as "invisible beings" and "endangered species" (p. 308) because of their lack of representation and institutional power. Building off a foundation Mosely laid more than forty years ago, significant momentum has developed within scholarly literature over the last five to ten years. This section will provide an overview of the academic literature that highlights the challenges Black men and women face in higher education leadership, the role of intersectionality and complexity of identity, mentorship, individual strategies for overcoming adversity, and institutional barriers, along with the need for future systemic change.

A recent trend in academic literature is qualitative phenomenological research to center the voices and experiences of Black senior administrators. These studies provide greater insight into the disparities that exist for Black leaders in higher education and the systemic barriers they encounter. Sparkman's qualitative examination of Black men senior administrators illustrates how racialized environments impact their leadership trajectories, often requiring them to navigate a landscape fraught with challenges related to their social identity (Sparkman, 2021).

This experience is compounded by institutional barriers that are not designed to support their success, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change within higher education institutions (Spencer, 2024). While some evidence exists that higher education is increasingly open to the diverse backgrounds and contributions of people of color, Black leaders face challenges from historic negative views on Black intellectualism, barriers to administrative opportunities, and a lack of professional networks and mentors (Thacker & Freeman, 2021).

Black women, who experience unique challenges due to intersectionality or embodying multiple minoritized identities where oppression compounds, face multiplied challenges and barriers (Crenshaw, 2013). This intersectionality often results in a complex landscape of both adversity and opportunity, necessitating a nuanced understanding of their leadership development. Women from marginalized backgrounds often face compounded barriers that can limit their access to leadership opportunities (Chen, 2024; Jaber, 2022). For instance, studies have shown that women of color experience unique challenges in academia, including microaggressions and systemic racism, which can hinder their professional advancement (Gaus et al., 2023; Chen, 2024). Recognizing and addressing these intersectional issues is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all women in higher education leadership.

One significant aspect of the experiences of Black women in higher education leadership is the phenomenon of cultural adversity. Chance's study highlights how Black women navigate these challenges, often employing resilience as a key strategy for overcoming obstacles such as tokenism and microaggressions (Chance, 2021). The cumulative nature of these daily insults can significantly impact their sense of belonging and willingness to pursue leadership roles (Townsend, 2020; Johnson, 2021). This underscores the importance of creating supportive

environments that foster inclusion and belonging for Black leaders, which is essential for their professional integration and success (Chance, 2021). Black women in senior leadership roles frequently experience the phenomenon of “imposter syndrome,” which requires strategies for addressing that imposter syndrome along with the need for more equitable leadership development (Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021).

The need for mentorship and supportive networks is critical for the advancement of Black women in leadership positions. Mentorship can serve as a protective factor against the barriers faced by Black women in educational leadership (Johnson, 2021). The presence of mentors and safe spaces can facilitate the development of leadership capabilities, enabling Black women higher education leaders to navigate the complexities of their roles more effectively (Mbilishaka et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of mentorship in shaping the leadership experiences of Black men cannot be overlooked. The intersection of mentorship and leadership development is crucial for fostering a new generation of Black leaders who can effectively advocate for equity and inclusion within their institutions (Jernigan et al., 2020).

On an individual level, the ability to navigate interpersonal relationships and understand the emotional dynamics within academic environments can significantly impact the success of Black leaders (Parrish, 2013). This underscores the need for leadership development programs that prioritize emotional intelligence as a core competency for aspiring leaders. The concept of "crucible experiences" is another critical element in understanding the leadership development of Black women in higher education. Chance's research identifies these transformative experiences as pivotal in shaping their leadership capabilities (Chance, 2021). Such experiences not only foster resilience but also empower Black women to assert their leadership identities in PWI's. This notion is echoed in the work of another study that highlights the importance of visibility and

representation for Black women faculty, who often feel marginalized within academic spaces (Ferguson et al., 2021).

In addition to personal resilience, the institutional context plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Black leaders. Black leaders consistently face underrepresentation in senior leadership roles within higher education, despite ongoing calls for greater diversity and inclusion (Arday, 2018). This systemic inequity necessitates a critical examination of institutional practices and policies that perpetuate barriers to advancement for Black leaders. Research has demonstrated that essential to the success of Black leaders is creating equitable campus climates by fostering a liberatory and equitable campus experience for Black students, faculty, and staff (McDougal, 2023; Bensimon et al., 2020). This aligns with the broader discourse on the need for systemic change to address the historical and ongoing inequities faced by Black individuals in academia.

By addressing systemic barriers and fostering supportive environments, higher education can better harness the potential of Black leaders, ultimately enriching the academic landscape for all. The experiences of Black individuals in higher education leadership are shaped by a complex interplay of personal resilience, systemic barriers, and institutional dynamics. The need for mentorship, supportive networks, and equitable campus climates is paramount in fostering the success of Black leaders. As higher education institutions strive for greater diversity and inclusion, understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by Black leaders will be essential for creating a more equitable academic environment. It is also important to understand and address the unique challenges faced by Latinx/a/o leaders, which is the focus of the next section.

Experiences of Latinx/a/o Leaders in Higher Education

While Latinx/a/o students comprise 22% of higher education enrollment, a percentage that is rapidly increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), this group is chronically underrepresented in both senior leadership and in the academic literature. Only 6% of all college presidents identify as Latinx/a/o (Melidona et. al, 2023), which reflects systemic barriers, including stereotypes, biases and limited access to opportunities. Only in recent years have a growing number of studies focusing on Latinx/a/o senior administrators begun to emerge (Burmicky, 2024a; Burmicky, 2024b; Ortega et. al, 2023). This section will overview the distinct disparities and institutional barriers Latinx/a/o leaders face, the role of cultural identity and the pressure to assimilate, as well as the critical need for mentoring and institutional support.

The experiences of Latinx/a/o senior higher education leaders are often marked by the need to address institutional racism and bias. Latinx leaders often find themselves in positions where they must challenge the status quo and advocate for policies that promote diversity and inclusion. This advocacy work can be both rewarding and exhausting, as it requires navigating institutional resistance while striving to create a more equitable environment for all students (Burmicky, 2024a; Espino & Ariza, 2022). Latinx/a/o students experience microaggressions based on their perceived ethnicity and race, which can extend to those in leadership positions (Smith et al., 2022). These subtle yet pervasive forms of discrimination can undermine the confidence and effectiveness of Latinx/a/o leaders.

One of the primary challenges faced by Latinx/a/o leaders in higher education is the pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms, often referred to as "whitening" oneself (Sanchez et al., 2021). It is common for Latinx/a/o leaders to feel compelled to adopt behaviors and attitudes that align with those of their predominantly White colleagues, leading to a sense of disconnection from their cultural identity (Sánchez et al., 2021). This phenomenon not only

affects their personal well-being but also impacts their leadership effectiveness, as they may struggle to authentically represent the communities they serve. The pressure to assimilate can create internal conflict as leaders navigate the expectations of their institutions while trying to maintain their cultural integrity.

Cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Latinx/a/o leaders, who bring a community cultural wealth of knowledge, skills, and networks to their senior leadership roles (Rodela & Rodríguez-Mojica, 2019). This cultural wealth can serve as a source of strength and resilience, enabling Latinx/a/o leaders to advocate for equity and social justice within their institutions. However, the lack of recognition and validation of these cultural assets by PWIs can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization among Latinx/a/o leaders (Rodela & Rodríguez-Mojica, 2019). The need for institutions to acknowledge and leverage the unique contributions of Latinx/a/o leaders is critical for fostering an inclusive environment that supports their success. For example, some factors traditionally viewed as disadvantages, such as being undocumented, can also foster resilience and critical consciousness among Latinx/a/o students (Cadenas & Kiehne, 2021). This resilience is often reflected in the leadership styles of Latinx/a/o leaders, who may draw upon their lived experiences to advocate for marginalized communities within their institutions. However, the systemic inequities that persist in higher education can create significant barriers to advancement for Latinx/a/o leaders, particularly for those who are also navigating the challenges associated with gender and socioeconomic status (Cadenas & Kiehne, 2021).

Mentorship is another crucial factor influencing the experiences of Latinx/a/o individuals in higher education leadership. It is important for Latinx/a/o leaders to have mentors who understand their unique challenges. Research indicates that mentorship relationships can provide

essential support and guidance for Latinx/a/o leaders navigating the complexities of their roles (Santa-Ramirez, 2022). However, the scarcity of Latinx/x/o mentors in senior leadership positions can limit the opportunities for emerging leaders to receive the guidance they need to advance in their careers.

Institutional support is vital for the success of Latinx/a/o leaders in higher education. As Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) become more prevalent in the landscape of higher education, there is an urgent need for senior leaders to consider the diverse needs of the Latinx community (Vega et al., 2024). This includes providing resources that address the specific challenges faced by Latinx/a/o leaders. The lack of institutional support can exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder the ability of Latinx/a/o leaders to effect meaningful change within their organizations. Therefore, it is essential for institutions to prioritize the development of supportive structures that empower Latinx/a/o leaders and facilitate their professional growth through opportunities such as gaining access to people who will advocate for their career development. (Burmicky, 2024b).

Latinx/a/o higher education leaders face distinct challenges but also bring distinct capacity for leadership. The need for institutions to recognize and leverage the unique contributions of Latinx/a/o leaders, as well as to provide mentorship and support, is essential for fostering their success. As higher education institutions seek to address the disparities experienced by racial minorities, understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by Latinx/a/o leaders will be essential for creating a more equitable academic environment.

Racial Disparities Conclusion

In summary, a growing body of research is illuminating the challenge of a lack of representation among senior administrators by centering the voices of minoritized senior leaders.

One observation as I scanned the literature for peer-reviewed journal articles on other racial and ethnic groups, including Asian Americans and Native Americans, was that the results were sparse. The primary studies I did discover on races and ethnicities that were not about Black and Latinx/a/o higher education leaders were dissertations. For example, a recent dissertation highlighted the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Women, who account for less than one percent of leadership roles and have the largest gender gap of any minoritized racial or ethnic group in higher education leadership. The dissertation highlighted the challenges Asian women experience ascending to leadership roles, stereotypes they must overcome, and their complex relationship with mentors (Marino-Del Mar, 2024). Another recent dissertation studied the experiences of Native American women. This dissertation revealed that Native American women had a holistic leadership style that emphasized community and collaboration and highlighted the need to incorporate Indigenous philosophies into leadership discourse (Etsitty-Dorame, 2024). Additionally, some dissertations are also focusing on religion, which can intersect with race and gender in distinct ways. One dissertation focused on the experiences of Muslim women and had similar themes to other studies exploring higher education leadership and race. Specifically, Muslim women receive push back for aspiring to leadership roles, find their expertise is undermined, and experience insufficient access to mentoring networks (Bouzihay, 2024). Dissertations are the seeds of future publications, so there are significant signs that more research is forthcoming.

The research highlights the barriers to entry for minoritized people and the reasons why retention of minoritized senior administrators needs improvement. These studies align with a priority of Critical Race Theory to center the voice of people with minoritized racial identities to communicate their experiences and realities, which is a first step in understanding the

complexities of racism and beginning the process towards justice (Ladson-Billings, 2020). These studies are crucial for understanding the experiences of minoritized people and point to the need for advocacy in leadership to address the systems that lead to a lack of representation and challenges minoritized people face in senior leadership roles. Research on how White administrators can advocate through antiracist leadership has recently begun to emerge, and the next section will provide an overview of that literature.

Critical Perspectives on Administrative Leadership and Advocacy

Alongside a growing awareness of disparities faced by minoritized higher education leaders, recent literature has been developing a critical lens for the administrative leadership of higher education. Higher education leaders and scholars have increasingly expressed awareness that something needs to be done about these gender and racial disparities, and early scholarship is beginning to offer guidance on the way forward. This way forward is collectively known as critical advocacy, and both theories and examples of practice are beginning to emerge. This section will provide an overview of approaches to critical advocacy, the role of White administrators in dismantling institutional racism, and what the scholarship has to say on practical strategies for sustained equity and accountability.

Frameworks of Critical Advocacy in Higher Education Leadership

In 2015, Pasque and Carducci laid out a foundational call to action with a broad vision for a research agenda focused on critical advocacy in higher education organizations. Their agenda calls for scholars to use critical advocacy to imagine a future of higher education that is more equitable and just. They provide a roadmap for those engaged in this work and some recommendations for how to move from knowledge acquisition to advocacy (Pasque & Carducci, 2015). An early example is an article in 2017 that attempted to provide a feminist

approach to academic administration (Detweiler et. al., 2017). This approach imagines a future where senior administrators prioritize listening and where leadership is defined as successfully engaging and collaborating in a way that values and engages all stakeholders, as well as advocating for “equitable, social, structural change” (Detweiler et. al., 2017, pg. 463).

Another similar example of a critical advocacy framework is the “Community-Based Equity Audit” approach, which emphasizes the importance of collective and community-based leadership (Green, 2016). This method encourages leaders to engage with stakeholders beyond the confines of the institution, thereby extending their influence and fostering collaboration among diverse groups (Green, 2016). By conducting equity audits, leaders can identify disparities in access and outcomes within their institutions and develop targeted interventions to address these inequities. This participatory approach not only enhances accountability but also empowers communities to take an active role in shaping educational policies and practices.

Another critical advocacy framework is the “Transformative Leadership” model, which focuses on creating inclusive environments that promote social justice and equity (Shields & Hesbol, 2019). Transformative leaders prioritize the needs of marginalized groups and actively work to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder access to education (Shields & Hesbol, 2019). This approach requires leaders to engage in reflective practices that challenge their assumptions and biases, fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth. By embracing transformative leadership, senior leaders can inspire others to adopt similar practices, creating a ripple effect that promotes equity throughout the institution.

While these frameworks can be helpful mental models, they do not provide direct guidance for senior administrators who aspire to address the disparities experienced by minoritized senior administrators. The frameworks also lack examples of current applications

and need to be tested to confirm their validity. It is not obvious from the literature that these calls for change make the move from theory to effective practice.

The Role of White Administrators

The most recent literature in critical advocacy is beginning to focus on the role that White administrators can play in antiracist and anti-oppressive forms of leadership. White administrators, by virtue of their positionality, possess specific opportunities to challenge systemic racism and promote equity. Their engagement in anti-racist initiatives can catalyze significant changes within their institutions, as they are often in positions of power that can influence policies, practices, and the overall climate of the educational environment. It is essential for White administrators to recognize and confront their own racial identities and privileges. This self-awareness is a foundational step in anti-racist leadership, as it allows administrators to understand how their actions and decisions may perpetuate systemic inequalities. Research indicates that administrators who engage in self-reflection about their racial identity are better equipped to lead anti-racist initiatives effectively (Villavicencio et al., 2022; Khushal, 2022).

The importance of continuous learning and growth for White administrators cannot be overstated in the context of anti-racist leadership. White administrators must commit to ongoing education about race, racism, and anti-racist practices. This commitment can take the form of attending workshops, participating in discussions, and engaging with literature that challenges their understanding of race and privilege (Wetzel et al., 2021; Lerner, 2024). By remaining open to learning, administrators can adapt their strategies and approaches to better address the evolving landscape of racial equity in higher education.

The anti-racist role that White administrators can play, which the scholarship most often labels as an “ally,” does have its complexities. According to Patton and Biondi's (2015) study on White men faculty who aspired to be allies, this ally work often takes place at individual rather than institutional levels. In those situations where White faculty members “helped” students and colleagues who are people of color, they often receive accolades and praise. Working at the individual level can lead to interest convergence, a tenet of Critical Race Theory that states that social change for marginalized groups only occurs when their interests align with those of the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). The findings of this study suggest that more work needs to be done to move from “nice White guy[s]” (p. 511) to actively participating in the work of addressing barriers on an institutional and systemic level (Patton & Biondi, 2015). This study aims to provide guidance for senior administrators, particularly White men, to engage on an individual, institutional, and systems level.

Practical Strategies for Sustained Equity and Accountability for White Administrators

Within the past few years, articles have begun to move toward guidance and solutions for administrative leaders on the problem of a lack of representation and discrimination and inequities that minoritized senior administrators face. A starting point is for White administrators to actively commit to anti-racist practices and policies. This commitment should manifest in tangible actions, such as implementing comprehensive training programs focused on racial equity for faculty and staff. Studies show that anti-racist interventions, particularly those that involve training and education, can significantly enhance the beliefs and practices of campus leaders regarding racial equity (Strayhorn, 2023; Tevis & Foste, 2023; Gooden et al., 2018). By prioritizing professional development that emphasizes anti-racist pedagogy and practices, administrators can create a more informed and responsive educational environment. In addition

to training, White administrators can play a pivotal role in reshaping institutional policies to promote equity. This involves critically assessing existing policies through an anti-racist lens and making necessary adjustments to eliminate discriminatory practices. For example, the integration of Critical Race Theory (CRT) into policy discussions can provide a framework for understanding and dismantling systemic racism within educational institutions (Aldana et al., 2023; Welton et al., 2018).

Another practical strategy is for White senior administrators to foster a culture of accountability within their institutions. This includes establishing mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents of racism and discrimination. Research highlights the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue about race and racism, which can empower marginalized voices and facilitate meaningful conversations about equity (Washington et al., 2023; Genao & Mercedes, 2021). By promoting transparency and accountability, White senior administrators can demonstrate their commitment to anti-racist leadership and encourage others to engage in similar practices.

A final example of a practical approach is collaboration with diverse stakeholders. White senior administrators should actively seek to engage with faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented backgrounds in decision-making processes. This collaborative approach not only enriches the dialogue around anti-racism but also ensures that the perspectives of those most affected by systemic racism are included in institutional strategies (Bell, 2020; Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021). This collaborative work should be done with an awareness of the exhaustion people of color often feel working with White administrators, who are often unwilling to make tangible sacrifices to pursue racial justice (Mathew et al., 2023). By both valuing diverse voices and making tangible sacrifices, White administrators can foster a more inclusive environment

that reflects the needs and aspirations of the entire campus community. All the research surrounding these practical strategies points to the need for additional research that will provide more nuance and insights into effective advocacy work. The purpose of this present research study is to meaningfully contribute to this call for continued scholarship.

In conclusion, since White men currently hold a disproportionately large number of senior leadership positions in higher education, it seems obvious that part of the solution to addressing the disparities moving forward will include White men as a group relinquishing power and proactively participating in the dismantling of these systems that have perpetuated inequity from the beginning. The current literature is beginning to provide guidance for how White administrators can meaningfully participate in the work of dismantling systems of inequity in higher education, as well as the complexity of White administrators acting as allies in this work. This study aspires to contribute a distinct perspective on this growing body of research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guides this study is a blend of LMX theory, intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's (2020) framework for administrators who wish to use their jobs to create equity and justice. In this section, I provide an overview of the theory or framework, and a few examples of how these theories are being utilized in higher education research, along with how I utilized this conceptual framework in this study.

Key Tenets of LMX Theory

LMX Theory goes back to the 1970's, and the scholarship around the theory is accelerating up to the present (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Van Breukelen et al, 2006). LMX Theory is a prominent framework in organizational behavior that emphasizes the two-way relationships between leaders and their followers. The theory posits that leaders do

not treat all followers equally; rather, they develop unique relationships with each member, which can be categorized into “in-group” and “out-group” exchanges. The quality of these exchanges significantly influences various organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction, performance, and turnover intentions (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

One of the foundational tenets of LMX Theory is the concept of social exchange, which underpins the interactions between leaders and followers. Social exchange theory suggests that relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges of resources, whether tangible or intangible, and that the quality of these exchanges can affect the overall dynamics within the workplace (Gulati & Bhal, 2003; Breukelen et al., 2006). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation, leading to enhanced communication and collaboration between leaders and their followers (Wang, 2022). Conversely, low-quality exchanges may result in feelings of neglect and disengagement among subordinates, ultimately impacting their performance and organizational commitment (Goertzen & Fritz, 2004; Ordun & Acar, 2014).

The dynamic nature of LMX relationships is another key tenet of the theory. LMX is not a static construct; rather, it evolves over time based on the interactions and experiences shared between leaders and members (Baker, 2019). This dynamic aspect highlights the importance of ongoing communication and feedback in fostering high-quality exchanges. Leaders who actively engage with their followers and demonstrate emotional intelligence are more likely to cultivate strong LMX relationships, which can lead to improved employee performance and satisfaction (Wang et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2022). Moreover, the emotional component of LMX, including the ability of leaders to empathize and connect with their followers, plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of these exchanges (Byun et al., 2017; Ma & Chang, 2019).

In addition to individual outcomes, LMX Theory also addresses the broader implications for organizational culture and effectiveness. Organizations that prioritize the development of high-quality LMX relationships are likely to experience enhanced collaboration, communication, and overall performance (Fikarlo et al., 2019; Glover & Lew, 2021). The emphasis on relational dynamics within LMX Theory underscores the importance of fostering a supportive organizational climate that encourages positive leader-member interactions (Shi, 2023). As organizations navigate complex challenges, the ability to cultivate strong LMX relationships can serve as a critical driver of success and resilience.

In the past, LMX Theory has legitimized the reality of inequality between in-group and out-group members (Van Breukelen et al., 2006). It is only within the past few years that researchers such as Sparkman (2021) have considered the dynamics of race and gender in relation to LMX theory research, and this study seeks to understand the dynamics of LMX Theory through the critical lens of race and gender. The next section will overview the use of LMX Theory in higher education leadership research.

LMX Theory & Higher Education Leadership Research

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory has been utilized multiple times in higher education leadership research, particularly providing valuable insights into the dynamics of relationships between academic leaders and faculty members. One notable study by Duyan and Yıldız (2018) explores the effect of leader-member exchange on the job performance of academic staff in higher education institutions. The authors emphasize that the quality of the relationship between administrators (leaders) and academic staff (followers) significantly impacts the performance of the latter. Their findings suggest that high-quality LMX relationships

foster better job performance among faculty members, reinforcing the importance of nurturing these exchanges in academic environments (Duyan & Yıldız, 2018).

In another study, Hanley (2023) investigates the role of grit and LMX in enhancing faculty engagement. The research posits that faculty members who exhibit higher levels of grit are more likely to engage positively with their academic chairs, thereby improving their overall engagement levels. This study underscores the interplay between personal attributes and LMX, again suggesting that leaders who cultivate strong relationships with their faculty can enhance engagement and, by extension, academic productivity (Hanley, 2023).

Additionally, the work of Zacher et al. (2011) examines the moderating effects of leader generativity on the relationships between leader age, LMX, and leadership success. This research indicates that generative leaders who focus on mentoring and developing others can enhance the quality of LMX, which in turn contributes to leadership effectiveness in higher education settings. The findings highlight the importance of generativity in fostering positive leader-member relationships and achieving successful leadership outcomes in higher education (Zacher et al., 2011).

Sparkman (2021) is one of the first studies to blend LMX theory with a racial lens called “nigrescence,” which is “a racial identity model that explains the process of acknowledging and affirming Black identity and providing a lens to examine the experiences of Black males in higher education executive leadership” (Sparkman, 2021, p. 281). This phenomenological study, which explores the experiences and pathways to higher education leadership for minoritized people in North Carolina, utilized LMX theory in the interview protocol to reveal the themes and the essence of networks and relationships that enable an individual to thrive in a senior administrative role. This study also explored if LMX theory has the capacity to demonstrate the

ability for individuals to address, dismantle, and reimagine the institutional systems that perpetuate disparities, and a discussion of the findings is in chapter five.

Key Tenets of Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a concept rooted in Black feminist thought and critical race theory, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a framework for examining how multiple social categories intersect to shape experiences of oppression and privilege (Rutherford & Davidson, 2019). While often attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 coinage, intersectionality has deeper historical roots in grassroots women's movements in the Global South and the United States Black women's movement (Bastia et al., 2022). The concept has since evolved across various domains, including academic research, international policy, and advocacy politics (Bastia et al., 2022). Some scholars argue that intersectionality's radical origins have been diluted in certain applications, calling for a re-radicalization of the concept to fulfill its social justice aims (Liu, 2018; Hancock, 2016).

In the United States, Black feminist thought has roots dating back to the mid-1800's with early leaders such as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, who expressed early Black feminist perspectives. Cooper, born into slavery in 1858, became an internationally renowned educator, activist, and intellectual (May, 2009). Her 1892 book "A Voice from the South" was the first book-length black feminist analysis in the United States (May, 2009). Cooper's work emphasized the importance of the black female body in understanding questions of identity and navigating the public sphere (Cooper, 2010). Truth, known for her powerful speeches like "Ain't I a Woman?" where she highlighted the differences in treatment between White women and women of color, challenged gender norms and racial stereotypes (Cooper, 2010). Both women's contributions laid the groundwork for intersectional analysis, which gained momentum in the

mid-20th century in the wake of feminist movements and concurrently with the Civil Rights Movement. Black women thought leaders like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Pauli Murray and Audre Lorde centered the experiences of Black women, highlighting and engaging with the many aspects of racial inequities with gender inequality (Schiller, 2000). This thought leadership laid the groundwork for the critical theory of intersectionality.

Most scholars agree that Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in her late 1980’s scholarship to address the unique experiences of Black women facing multiple forms of discrimination based on race and gender (Crenshaw, 2013; Roth, 2017; Tordoff, 2023). Her understanding of this concept was rooted in Black feminist thought, emphasizing that social identities such as race, gender, and class are interconnected and cannot be examined in isolation (Healy, 2022; Bond, 2021). Since its inception, intersectionality has evolved into a multifaceted field of study, influencing various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and law (Moradi et al., 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Contemporary research continues to explore intersectionality's implications for social justice, policy analysis, and identity formation, highlighting its relevance in addressing systemic inequalities (Barretti, 2015; Collins, 2015; Gueta, 2020). Overall, intersectionality serves as both a theoretical lens and a methodological approach, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and oppression (Rice et al., 2019; Roth & Dashper, 2016).

Key tenets of intersectionality include the recognition that social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are not independent but rather interdependent and mutually constitutive (Burger et al., 2021; Grzanka et al., 2020; Hopkins, 2017). This perspective highlights how systemic inequalities are reinforced through overlapping social identities,

necessitating a nuanced understanding of social justice issues (Rosenthal, 2016; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Overstreet et al., 2020).

Another critical aspect of intersectionality is its focus on power dynamics and social context. It encourages an analysis of how different forms of oppression intersect and manifest in specific contexts, influencing individual's experiences (Wright & Chan, 2022; Kanagasingam et al., 2022; Brinkman & Donohue, 2020). Furthermore, intersectionality advocates for a commitment to social justice, urging scholars and practitioners to engage in activism that addresses structural inequalities (Gueta, 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Moradi et al., 2020). This approach not only seeks to understand the complexities of identity but also aims to transform oppressive systems through informed action (Al-Hamad et al., 2021; Moradi et al., 2020; Figgou et al., 2023).

Intersectionality & Higher Education Leadership Research

Work exploring the intersections of multiple marginalized identities is a growing area of scholarship in higher education leadership. Research has emphasized the critical role intersectionality plays in higher education leaders understanding the multifaceted experiences of marginalized groups (Agosto & Roland, 2018). Research also illustrates how intersectionality can interrogate the socialization processes within doctoral education, revealing the simultaneous impacts of race, class, and gender on students' experiences (Ramirez, 2017). Furthermore, studies also emphasize the need for intersectionality not only as a theoretical lens but as a methodological tool to better understand the experiences of Black women in higher education (Haynes et al., 2020). This growing body of literature underscores the necessity of incorporating intersectionality into educational leadership research to foster equity and inclusivity in academic environments (Moorosi et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2017; Museus & Griffin, 2011).

Similarly, many studies discuss the importance of intersectionality in addressing the unique challenges faced by Black women in academia, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Townsend, 2021; Joseph et al., 2021). African American women have typically been included in studies featuring African Americans or women, but those broad categories fail to capture the distinct experiences of African American women who face multiple forms of oppression (Townsend, 2021). The 2021 Townsend study made use of the scholarly term “cultural tax” or “Black Tax” where African American women are expected to do more work (e.g., sit on diversity committees, mentor women students, etc.) by virtue of their identities (Griffen et al., 2011). The study also names the problem of microaggressions where African American women often experience hostile work environments and administrative violence because of their identity. The study emphasizes the need for further study to improve or redo the environment of higher education leadership, which is the purpose of this present study. It also reveals the capacity of intersectionality to identify systems that perpetuate disparities and inequity that senior administrators need to address and dismantle, and it is a guiding theory for making sense of the complex landscape faced by senior administrators who embody multiple forms of marginalized identities.

Application of LMX Theory and Intersectionality

LMX guided this study based on the assumption that having a high-quality relationship with a mentor and developing other leaders are key aspects of dismantling institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities. People who identify as White men have exclusively held positions of power for most of higher education history and they have exclusively been the people in the room when key decisions were made. While a change is taking place (Lederman, 2022), White men still predominantly serve as gatekeepers to positions

of power. LMX Theory allows for the exploration of White men and senior administrators who are known for promoting equity. Applying LMX Theory to the experiences of the senior administrators in this study will help identify the influences that empower them to be more adept at advocating for representation and dismantling systems that perpetuate discrimination and inequity. By applying the critical lens of intersectionality to LMX Theory, I can gauge how individuals are impacting the trajectory of an institution and the influence that their current and historical 'in-group' plays in their approach to this work.

LMX and intersectionality have heavily influenced my research design. For my research participants, I employed an advisory group comprised of women and/or people of color to recommend participants who are senior administrators known for their work in disrupting higher education systems that perpetuate disparities. The idea of an advisory group comprised of women and/or people of color is rooted in the tenants of intersectionality. Intersectionality advocates for a commitment to social justice, urging scholars and practitioners to engage in activism that addresses structural inequalities (Gueta, 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Moradi et al., 2020), and this study is a response to that call. The advisory group was a way to center the voices and experiences of people experiencing marginalization in higher education. LMX is also informative as this advisory group became part of my 'in-group' along with my dissertation committee to guide this study.

This study operates under the assumption that women and/or people of color have influenced those making an impact in this area, and this influence is a driving force behind their work. Therefore, I crafted the interview questions using LMX theory and intersectionality. LMX Theory and intersectionality also informed the data collection method. In addition to asking questions about mentors and influences, I used the capacity of IPA to determine the role women

and/or people of color have played in the professional careers of the senior administrators. I also approached my data analysis with an attempt to center the influence of women and/or people of color. Finally, in my interpretation of the results, I credit women and/or people of color and look for the specific ways these senior administrators are addressing the overlapping forms of oppression experienced by minoritized senior administrators.

Kezar and Posselt's Equity and Justice Framework

This study also utilizes the equity and justice framework for administrators developed by Kezar and Posselt (2020). Adrianna Kezar and Julie Posselt are both faculty members at the University of Southern California. Kezar is the Dean's Professor for Higher Education, while Posselt is an Associate Professor of Education. Both scholars are known and respected for their work on higher education leadership. Their framework appears in a book they co-edited titled *Higher Education Administration for Social Justice and Equity*. The book is a "call for justice and equity in higher education administration" and centers on the premise that "all administrators have the potential to use their roles to create equity and encourage greater justice" (Kezar & Posselt, 2020, pg. 1). In the opening chapter of the book, Kezar and Posselt (2020) provide a framework for higher education administrators who wish to use their jobs to promote equity and justice.

The framework has seven main components. The first is to develop clear definitions of equity and justice for the purpose of catalyzing effective action. The work of equity and justice is complex and challenging. A starting point is to have clear definitions that create shared understanding of what equity and justice mean in a particular context, as the expression of equity and justice can vary by community (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). Senior administrators need to do the work to define what equity and justice look like in their institution.

The second component is mindful administrative practice, which means slowing down to make decisions that impact others and exploring the ethics of the situation where they find themselves. The current system of higher education in the United States incentivizes senior administrators to make quick, efficient decisions that always have revenue generation in mind. Kezar and Posselt (2020) advocate for administrators to slow down in making key decisions to reflect upon and learn from the past, while also being aware of existing frameworks that will influence decisions.

The third component is wisdom in judgement, which means rejecting reactive, short-term decision-making for a posture of doing what is best for the collective good in the long term. Kezar and Posselt (2020) see mindfulness and wisdom as “natural companions,” where mindful practice creates space for one to make wisdom in judgements. Kezar and Posselt (2020) use the following definition of wisdom taken from Sternberg’s balance theory:

“as the use of one’s intelligence, creativity, common sense and knowledge and as mediated by positive ethical values toward achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, (c) and extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long terms to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments and (c) selection of new environments” (Sternberg, 1998, p. 353). Wisdom in judgement considers ethics and morals in decision-making, which paves the way for equity and justice (Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

The fourth component is a critical consciousness about power, which is “being aware of the way that power shapes administrative structures and culture – and working to dismantle these structures when power operates oppressively” (Kezar & Posselt, 2020, p. 12). This component

involves recognizing the individuals involved in decision-making processes and intentionally including them in decisions that directly affect them. Kezar and Posselt (2020) also name that in the context of the United States higher education, race and racism must be on the forefront of critical consciousness about power because of its prevalence and destructive power in society and its institutions, and in particular higher education.

The fifth component is knowledge of self and positionality, which is an ongoing sense of one's own privilege and awareness of how one's social identities and backgrounds shape experiences and viewpoints. Kezar and Posselt (2020) utilize intersectionality for this component, particularly referencing Collins's (2002) work in *Black Feminist Thought*, which posits that our identities and backgrounds shape our viewpoints and experiences. Administrators who wish to use their work to promote equity and justice must have consistent and routine practices of self-reflection for the purpose of expanding opportunities where they are unequally distributed.

The sixth component is student-centeredness, which is a decision to put students at the center of administrative actions and decisions. As students are typically the most vulnerable in higher education systems, centering their overall flourishing will lead to higher levels of equity and justice. Kezar and Posselt are careful not to center students for the purpose of deepening the mentality of students as consumers and supporting their commodification, but rather to center students as learners and democratic participants in higher education institutions (Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

The final component is to routinize mindfulness and wisdom. This includes developing a habit of referring to data for decision-making rather than acting on instinct or assumptions. Kezar and Posselt see mindfulness as necessary to the starting point for sharpening skills that give one a

disposition toward wisdom (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). This routine of mindfulness and wisdom is meant to be an alternative to automated thinking. It also entails thinking beyond racial and gender boundaries and actively engaging with individuals who face marginalization due to other identities such as sexual orientation and class.

Application of Kezar & Posselt's Framework

Kezar and Posselt's equity and justice framework provided a starting point for identifying the themes that tie together how senior administrators advocate for equity and justice. As it is relatively new, this framework can be tested for credibility and trustworthiness through the data created by my research participants. Kezar and Posselt provided examples of how their framework might be used by higher education leaders, and this study provides a practical look at senior administrators who are doing this work and how they relate to the framework in chapter five. Kezar and Posselt's framework guided the questions for the interviews in this study and aided in the analysis of the interview data. Overall, the framework was a useful starting point for what could be discovered through this research. It created the possibility of trustworthiness for my data, as well as a critique of this new framework.

In conclusion, I utilized the two theories and the framework to provide perspective on my research. These academic tools helped me to understand the complexity of the disparities that exist, as well as a starting point for addressing them. They have informed both the research questions and research design. They also helped provide depth, context, and meaning to the phenomena of people addressing these disparities among senior higher education leaders. I combined the leadership theory of LMX and the critical theory of intersectionality to understand the influences of senior administrators known for their work in dismantling inequitable and unjust systems. I also tested Kezar and Posselt's framework to see where its seven components

emerge in the experiences and practices of my interview participants. Overall, this conceptual framework helped to guide this study from creating the design through sharing the findings and the discussion of those findings.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has drawn attention to the most recent literature exploring the disparities related to gender and race among higher education senior leadership. The literature review covered the disparities in both gender and race, as well as the most recent critical perspectives on administrative leadership and advocacy. The literature review provided key examples of the work presently being done, as well as demonstrating a consistent call for more research in this key area. This chapter also overviewed the study's conceptual framework that combines LMX theory, intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's (2020) framework for equity and justice for higher education administrators. The next chapter will describe the research method this study employed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research design, participant recruitment, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures of this study, as well as my positionality as the researcher. As described in Chapter 1, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, processes, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

Several recent research studies have been calling for more studies on the experiences of senior administrators who are trying to fix the problem of not having enough women in leadership positions and the discrimination that minoritized senior administrators face (Kezar & Posselt, 2020; Melidona et. al. 2023, Espinosa et. al, 2019). To explore the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity, I used a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who are addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. A qualitative approach is best situated to focus on the in-depth lived experiences of the senior administrators. Not much is known about the specific experiences and approaches that senior administrators have toward addressing disparities in higher education leadership. The fluid and malleable nature of qualitative research allows for the flexibility required to gather data in a developing field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, I used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that reveals the meaning or essence of individuals lived experiences to more deeply understand a concept or phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 1984). The phenomena being explored in this study are the experiences of senior administrators who are actively engaged in the work of confronting racial and gender disparities in higher education leadership. I used phenomenology for this research because it allowed me to approach the “phenomenon with a fresh perspective, as if viewing it for the first time, through the eyes of participants who have direct, immediate experience with it” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 50). I sought a more in-depth understanding of higher education institutions through the experiences of senior administrators who are engaging disparities and inequities created on a systemic level. The phenomenological approach is the most appropriate for this research because it incorporates the experiences of the research participants to understand the essence of the phenomenon and utilized both “universal and divergent aspects of the experience itself” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 45). Phenomenology is a research method that is gaining increasing use. One “right” way of using phenomenology does not exist, and researchers utilize phenomenology as a research method in a wide variety of ways. For this study, I employed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach as outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

IPA allows rich data to be collected, and I selected this method because it allows for an in-depth investigation into a topic that is gaining momentum in recent academic literature. IPA is concerned with the detailed exploration of individual lived experiences on their own terms, but also as a hermeneutic endeavor (Spiers & Smith, 2019). IPA has an “idiographic commitment to the detailed examination of each case before looking for convergences and divergences between

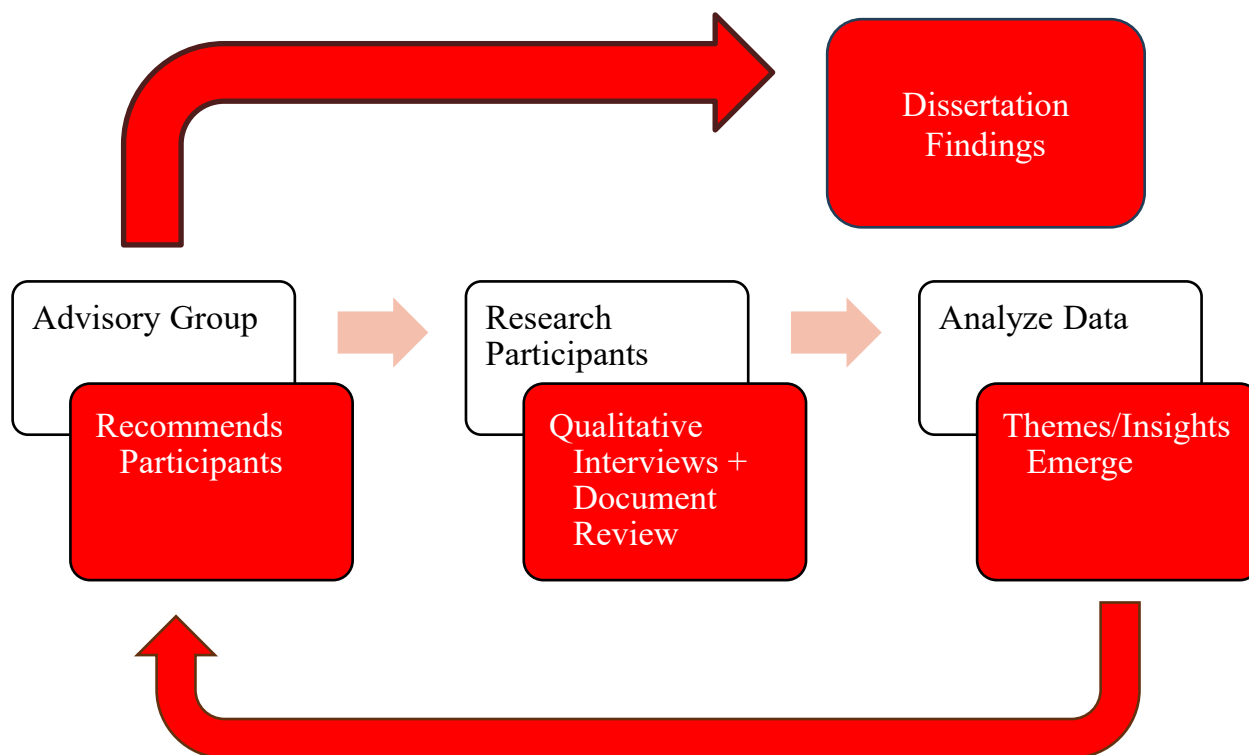
participants” (Spiers & Smith, 2019, p. 2). IPA excels as a research method in addressing “emotionally complex reactions to specific phenomena” and is well-suited to “exploring dynamic processes and times of change in people’s lives” (Spiers & Smith, 2019, p. 2). The work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the systems that perpetuate disparities in representation and inequity for women and people of color is deeply personal and motivated by several complex factors and experiences. IPA allowed me to appropriately collect data revealing personal and emotional dimensions and allowed group experiential themes to emerge from that data attuned to distinctive individual experiences.

The philosophies of phenomenology and hermeneutics, along with the principle of idiography, underpin the IPA approach (Smith, et. al., 2009). IPA is influenced by four key phenomenological thinkers: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Husserl influences IPA researchers to carefully examine experience, while Heidegger adds consideration of the context for the experience (Smith, et. al., 2009). As directed by Merleau-Ponty, IPA researchers are interested in the physical and emotional aspects of the phenomenon, and they are also focused on the research participants’ relational experiences, as informed by Sartre (Spiers & Smith, 2019). Hermeneutics is another key philosophical underpinning for IPA. IPA was crafted as a research method by Smith (2007), who described IPA as “a double hermeneutic in which the researcher makes sense of the participant making sense of their own experience” (p. 4). The idiographic lens, a distinctive hallmark of IPA, guides the researcher to conduct a detailed analysis of each case and attempt a broad understanding before looking at patterns across cases (Spiers & Smith, 2019). IPA is therefore both a method and a guide for this research, and I chose it to understand how higher education senior administrators make meaning of their experience as professionals, particularly in doing the work

of confronting gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. Finally, IPA also provides clarity on research steps and, as a novice researcher, I benefited from clear pathway for conducting research as outlined in *Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Research Design

A key component of my IPA study is an advisory group comprised of women and people of color, which is distinct from my dissertation committee. This advisory group recommended participants for my study who were a sample of senior administrators who the advisory group recognized as being active in the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. My primary data source was semi-structured interviews. I also invited participants to submit documents as artifacts as a secondary data source. In designing the interview protocol, I used Bevan's (2014) structure for descriptive phenomenological research including questions to determine context, apprehend the phenomenon, and clarify the phenomenon. Both my dissertation committee and advisory group provided feedback that improved the interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix A. I completed the data analysis following the IPA guidelines as outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022) and I used NVIVO, a qualitative research software tool, to organize my data. The final step was to share the group experiential themes that emerged from the IPA study with my advisory group, and I invited their feedback on the findings, which are recorded in chapter five. Figure 1 below provides an overview of my research process.

Figure 1*Research Process Overview*

The advisory group is a distinctive and key aspect of my research design. I was struggling to figure out how to compensate for any implicit biases or areas of ignorance in doing this work as someone who identifies as a White man. I also wanted to ensure that my voice would not be the central voice of the findings and discussion. One of my dissertation committee members recommended the idea of an advisory group to provide accountability and additional layers of insight into my study. I promptly accepted the idea, and it has been enriching to do this work collaboratively. All members of my advisory group are current higher education senior administrators who identify as a woman and/or a person of color. Three of the four members have been helpful conversation partners throughout my doctoral studies and are people whose

judgement I trust. The fourth member of my advisory group was recommended by my dissertation committee chair, and this person also happened to be a long-time work colleague.

After receiving approval from my committee for my dissertation proposal, I immediately extended invitations to the advisory committee. As a part of the invitation, I gave clear expectations for their involvement, which was divided into two phases. The first phase was to immediately recommend approximately three to four senior administrators for my study. The second phase came after I drafted the group experiential themes from my analysis of the data. I shared an early draft of those findings with my advisory group and invited their feedback. I extended five total invitations to participate in my advisory group. One person politely declined due to other commitments but did have multiple conversations with me and served in an unofficial capacity. Four people enthusiastically accepted and have been a great source of wisdom and encouragement for this study. The important contribution of the advisory group is evident in the quality of research participants, as well as the feedback they provided for my findings.

Participants

I initially sought eight to ten participants using a purposeful sampling approach. In an effort to create a sample where all participants have similar connections to the phenomena, as recommended for IPA studies, I asked my advisory group to recommend individuals who fit all of the following criteria to participate in the study: 1) must be employed full-time as a senior higher education administrator (see previous definition, but essentially includes presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, deans, associate deans, and provosts) at a four-year PWI institution in North Carolina 2) hold a Doctoral degree 3) have a minimum of five years of experience as a higher education senior administrator 4) must be recommended by the advisory

group as someone who is actively engaged in the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education.

I shared those criteria with my advisory group and invited them to recommend participants. The criteria for participation in my advisory group was 1) current senior higher education leader at a PWI higher education institution in North Carolina 2) hold a doctoral degree 3) the candidate must be a member of a minoritized group, such as a woman or a person of color. IPA studies focus more on the detailed account of individual experiences, where quality is celebrated more than quantity (Smith et. al., 2009). Therefore, I sought a small sample of approximately eight to ten participants. My advisory group recommended fourteen total participants. I extended invitations to all fourteen recommended participants. Of the fourteen, nine people in total accepted my invitation and completed my informed consent. Chapter four provides an in-depth overview of my research participants.

I did not limit the research sample based on race or gender. The sample included people of different genders and racial identities. The common thread that tied all participants together in what IPA names as a “homogenous sample” is peer recognition of effectively addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities in representation of administrators and inequities experienced by administrators minoritized based on race and gender within higher education (Smith et al., 2009).

This study focused on people working at PWI universities in North Carolina. The research triangle located in the piedmont region of North Carolina has multiple universities. The proximity of these top-tier higher education institutions creates an incredible opportunity to learn from the experiences of higher education senior leadership. The institutions have all made public

commitments in recent years to excellence through diversity, and multiple universities contain many higher education senior leaders. The state of North Carolina has a higher education system that is nationally recognized for its strength. The state contains sixteen public universities in the UNC System, and a robust amount of private four-year universities across the state. North Carolina is an academically rich state, and it assisted in my advisory group identifying eligible participants.

I collected data through interviews with the senior administrators recommended by my advisory group. I also invited and received written documents that served as additional artifacts to analyze as a part of my data set. I sought and received appropriate approval from the North Carolina State Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning my study. As soon as I secured IRB approval, I sent email invitations to qualifying individuals recommended by my advisory group, which included a link to a private survey to verify their adherence to the selection criteria. The email invitation also included the purpose statement, description, data collection methods, and approximate timeline for the study. See Appendix C for the email invitations and Appendix B for a copy of my informed consent survey. As soon as a participant completed my informed consent form, I sent an invitation to schedule the interview. I did not financially compensate any participants in exchange for their participation in the study. However, I did offer reciprocity in the form of proactively sharing an executive summary of research findings at the conclusion of my study.

Data Collection

The three key components of data collection were in-person interviews, documents submitted by the research participants, and consultation with my advisory group. For this study, document analysis is fitting because it serves as an effective and complementary method in

qualitative research. To obtain the documents, I invited all research participants before and after the interview to provide any written documents related to the topic of the study. The documents were voluntarily given by the research participants and provided an additional layer of insight into the work of promoting equity. It became an efficient and unobtrusive way to verify the insights of the interviews and add additional insights to the study. The documents ended up being a mixture of published articles, news articles, a podcast transcript, strategic plans, and policy documents. The interviews, documents, and follow-up with the advisory group were the key to better comprehending the phenomena and addressing the research questions. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collection process.

Table 1

Data Collection Table

Method	Number of Participants	Brief Description
1:1 Interviews	9	Semi structured interviews of 60 to 90 minutes using a peer-reviewed interview protocol
Document Analysis	9	A review of published or written materials from participants that allude to insights related to research questions
Advisory Group Feedback	4	Feedback and reflections from the advisory group about emergent themes, either shared orally and/or in written format

I created an interview protocol designed to address the research question and utilized Castillo-Montoya's (2016) four-fold interview protocol refinement framework of "aligning interview questions with research questions, constructing an inquiry-based conversation, seeking

feedback on the protocol, and piloting the protocol ahead of time” (p. 812). My dissertation committee approved my interview protocol and provided insightful feedback that I incorporated into the final version of the protocol (see Appendix A). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with several open-ended questions serving as a guide, while also allowing for flexibility to steer the conversation in the desired direction. Embracing the unique challenge of interviewing time-constrained senior administrators, I employed McClure and McNaughtan's (2021) best practices for interviewing elites, which include proactive communication to secure the interview, thorough preparation, trust-building, and maintaining critical distance.

Each interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and was in a setting requested by the research participants to maximize their comfort level. I was willing to meet a research participant at any location of their choosing, or I gave the option to complete the interview via Zoom. Seven of the nine participants chose the privacy and convenience of Zoom, and two participants selected the in-person option. I audio recorded the interview using either physical equipment or the Zoom recording function and I also took physical notes. For each interview, I had a backup audio recorder with me in case the video recording equipment failed. During the interview, I followed best practices revealed by Jacob and Ferguson (2012) of following topics of interest, starting with the basics, using big, expansive open-ended questions, keeping the interview focused and listening well. The goal of the interview, in line with Rubin and Rubin (2011), was to create an environment where the research participants were comfortable answering open-ended questions and share their experiences and insights, using language the participants could easily understand. I also asked the participants for permission to follow up for further clarification either through written correspondence or through additional interviews, which took place after each interview.

The content of those interviews focused on three main areas. The first was to understand the participants' background and their career trajectory. During this section, I used LMX theory to help understand the people who made it possible for the person to obtain their current position, as well as who they seek to influence. Intersectionality assisted in understanding the influence of women and people of color on their career trajectory. The second section of the interview was about the experiences that led to an awareness and desire to address the problem of a lack of representation in higher education leadership and inequities experienced by minoritized senior leaders. Intersectionality was a helpful lens to exploring the experiences of the participants in this section. The final section was the experiences in addressing and dismantling the systems that perpetuate a lack of representation and inequity. Here I utilized Kezar and Posselt's (2020) equity and justice framework to frame the questions and it provided a way to synthesize the responses. LMX, intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's equity and justice framework influenced each section, in some cases blending the different lenses. Table 2 provides an overview of how the conceptual framework informs each question in the interview protocol.

Table 2

Interview Questions & Conceptual Framework

Research Question	Theory/Framework	Key Tenet
What is your current role and what are the dimensions of your work in that role?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity and Justice Framework	Knowledge of self and positionality
What were the important milestones along the way?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity and Justice Framework	Knowledge of self and positionality
What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome them?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity and Justice Framework	Knowledge of self and positionality
Who were the people who were most influential in your journey?	LMX Theory	Social Exchange

What role, if any, have women and/or people of color played in your career trajectory?	LMX Theory Intersectionality Theory	Social Exchange Power dynamics & social context
How did you become mindful of disparities and inequities for women and people of color in leadership positions?	Intersectionality Theory Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework	Race & gender are interdependent / Power dynamics & social context Mindful administrative practice
Can you share with me any stories when you witnessed a colleague experiencing discrimination?	Intersectionality Theory Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework	Race & gender are interdependent / Power dynamics & social context Mindful administrative practice
What wisdom has your experiences in this area cultivated? Meaning, what have you learned about your experiences of witnessing disparities and discrimination, and how does that learning inform your practices now?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework Intersectionality	Wisdom in judgement / Routinize mindfulness & wisdom Advocate for social justice
How do you define equity and justice in the context of higher education?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework	Develop clear definitions of equity & justice
How have you advocated for equity and justice in higher education leadership?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework Intersectionality	Mindful administrative practice Advocate for social justice
What have been your experiences navigating power dynamics to advocate for equity and justice in higher education?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework Intersectionality	Critical consciousness about power Power dynamics & social context
In what ways are you intentional about developing people (i.e. students and colleagues) for leadership positions? In what ways are you intentional about developing women and/or people of color for	LMX Theory Intersectionality	Dynamic Nature / Implications for organizational culture Race & gender are interdependent/advocate for social justice

leadership positions in higher education?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework	Student centeredness/Mindful administrative practice
What policies, processes, or strategies have you implemented to address those disparities? What are the background stories on the need for them?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework Intersectionality	Mindful administrative practice Advocate for social justice
If your work was entirely focused on addressing inequity, what might your day to day look like?	Kezar & Posselt's Equity & Justice Framework Intersectionality	Wisdom in judgement / Routinize mindfulness & wisdom Advocate for social justice

Data Analysis

This study centers on two research questions designed to simultaneously understand the experiences and discover the policies, practices and strategies utilized by senior administrators who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining higher education systems that perpetuate disparities in leadership. As a reminder, those research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, practices, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

The research questions and interview questions were intentionally open ended to allow participants to reflect on their own experiences and respond openly and authentically. The complete interview protocol is available in Appendix A. Group experiential themes emerged

following a full analysis of the data, including the transcripts from the nine one-on-one interviews and twenty-four total artifacts submitted by five of the participants.

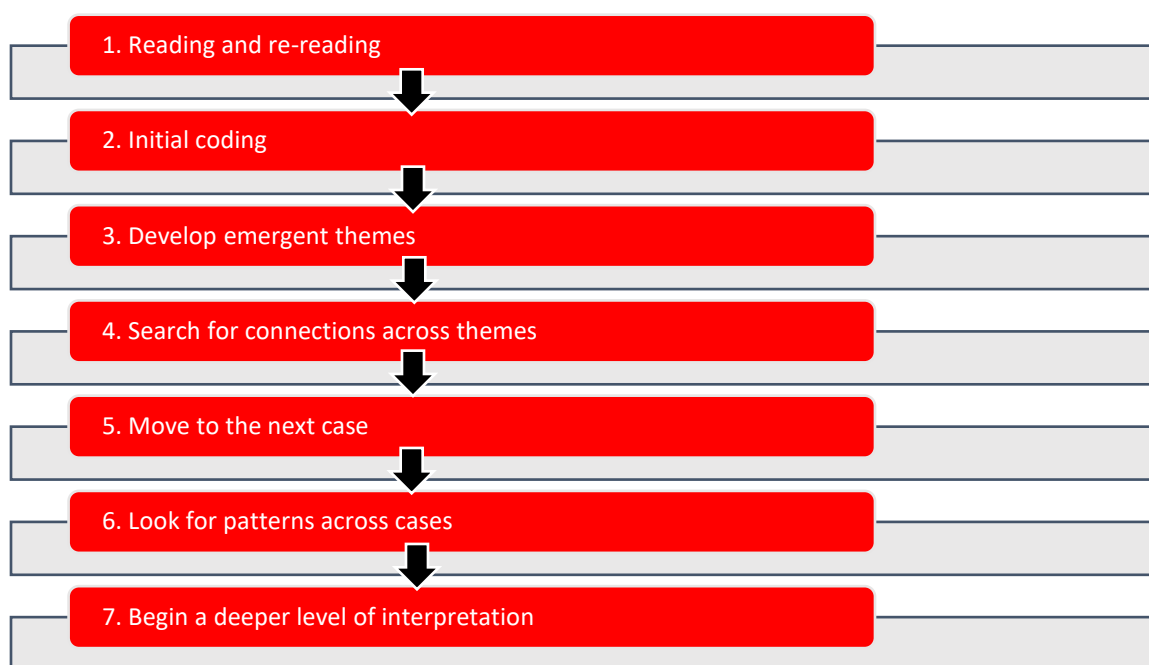
Within one week of all nine interviews, I created a full transcript of each conversation. I used a tool called Otter.ai to create the first draft of the transcript. While the software generated a decent draft, each transcript required significant editing by carefully listening to the audio recording from the interview. I also deidentified any details by creating pseudonyms for names, locations, and institutions that would directly tie the transcript back to an individual participant. After having a complete transcript, I emailed it to the research participant for the purpose of member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and empowering participants to make edits. It was also a second opportunity to invite participants to provide any additional documentation related to the interview. In the end, none of the participants took the option to edit their transcript. Two of the participants did provide additional context for their responses, and I incorporated that feedback into the transcript.

After completing the interviews and finalizing the transcripts, I took a break of several weeks to give myself some distance from the work and to create the possibility of seeing the data with fresh eyes. To prepare for analysis, I uploaded the nine transcripts and twenty-four artifacts into NVIVO, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). NVIVO helped to keep the data and coding organized and automatically created an activity log that recorded each coding and analytic decision. Following the break, I began to analyze the data carefully following the guidance of Smith and Nizza (2022) as outlined in *Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. Consistent with IPA, I followed the fundamental principles of “maintaining an idiographic and inductive approach so that the data for each participant are

analyzed on their own terms and as free as possible from theoretical constraints” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, pg. 31). Figure 2 provides a general overview of the steps for IPA.

Figure 2

Steps for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis



From *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*, by J. A. Smith, P. Flowers, and M. Larkin, 2009. SAGE Publications.

For the first phase of coding, the initial step was to simply listen to the audio recording of the interview while reading the transcript to familiarize myself with the conversation since it had been several weeks since I last engaged in the material. Relistening to the interview audibly also assisted in triggering my memory of the conversation and the audio provides nuances like changes in tone, volume, laughs, and other cues that support in interpretation. After familiarizing myself with the interview, I carefully read each transcript again, making exploratory notes that, following Smith and Nizza (2022), were descriptive summaries, linguistic notes on the audio, and conceptual notes that took the form of questions or curiosities. The next

step was to create codes, or what Smith and Nizza (2022) call ‘experiential statements,’ which are a “concise summary of what emerges as important in the notes associated with the corresponding portion of the transcript” (p. 39). Once I created experiential statements, I continued to reread the transcript to find connections between those statements and to cluster similar ones together. At this point, I would also apply this same process to any associated artifact if a participant submitted them. The final step was to create a table of ‘experiential themes.’ For each participant, I created what Smith and Nizza (2022) refer to as an ‘optimal table’ which included three to five themes, which each theme having three to five experiential statements.

The aim of my analysis work was to tell “the detailed story of the three to five most important things we have learned about how the participant experienced the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 48). Following the idiographic nature of IPA, I analyzed each case as an individual entity and created a complete table of experiential themes and statements before moving on to the next case. Once I completed the cases for all nine research participants, I added another layer of analysis. NVIVO has a function that will automatically code all the data. I ran this automatic coding process to discover if I missed anything in my own analysis work. The auto coding did reveal a few minor areas of oversight, and I revised a few of the tables of experiential themes as is consistent with the iterative nature of IPA.

For the second phase of coding, I completed a cross-case analysis. In this phase, I was looking to discover “common patterns and idiosyncratic differences within those similarities and how one case may shed light on another” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 51). To complete the work, I used a manual process. NVIVO does not easily allow cross-case analysis, so I created a document that included the tables of experiential themes for all nine participants. From there, I

physically marked up the document, drawing lines to signal connection, making notes, and applying codes. Engaging once again in an iterative process, eventually group experiential themes emerged. The group experiential themes demonstrate a “commitment to convergence and divergence” that point to similarities in the participant’s experiences, and “point to the particular and different ways in which those participants manifest the experience” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 56).

For the data analysis, I closely followed the IPA process outlined in the guidebook by Smith and Nizza (2022). I did deviate from the guidebook in one notable way that it is important to note for future studies implementing this approach. Smith and Nizza (2022) did not recommend using a CAQDAS. Instead, they advocated a manual approach of printing out transcripts and physically coding using highlighters, scissors, and different colored pens. That seemed untenable to me as a person who strongly prefers the convenience and flexibility of digital documents. I decided to use a CAQDAS called NVIVO, and overall, it was a positive experience for me.

First, it was convenient to have all the transcripts and submitted documents in one dashboard. The search function supported me in identifying themes and making connections across the cases. I turned on a function of NVIVO to capture an activity log of all actions I took in my data analysis, which adds an additional layer of accountability and integrity to the data analysis. It also made it convenient to build a codebook and then see coding connections across the data. Finally, NVIVO also had an added benefit of automatically coding the data. I did not use this function until the very end after I had manually coded every part of the data. I compared my codes to the auto codes, and it helped me see a gap in my interpretation. Specifically, I

missed seeing a connection in the processes that several of the participants described using in their work.

NVIVO is not designed specifically for IPA, so it did take trial and error to adapt NVIVO to the IPA steps outlined in Smith and Nizza (2022). Eventually I figured out a method to isolate individual cases in NVIVO to treat the data from each participant as an individual case. Once I had created a table of experiential themes for each participant, I did move to a manual approach outside of NVIVO for the cross-case analysis. I printed out a large document with all the experiential theme tables, and I physically coded this document using symbols and arrows to make connections. IPA is an iterative process, so I would return to the data in NVIVO and revisit codes until my five group experiential themes emerged. Overall, using NVIVO was an overwhelmingly positive experience for me, and I would recommend it for researchers who are comfortable using software that can be unwieldy at times.

Once my initial data analysis was complete, I completed a first draft writing up the findings. I shared the draft of the findings with my advisory group. I invited them to provide feedback on the following three areas: 1. Based on your experiences as a senior administrator, what resonated strongly with you? 2. Based on your experiences, does anything not resonate? Anything you disagree with? Anything that seems off or disjointed? Anything you think is problematic or offensive based on my position as a White man writing about this work? 3. What recommendations or suggestions do you have for my final chapter, where I will discuss the findings, as well as the implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research?

I received feedback from my advisory group, made the appropriate adjustments, and then interacted with their feedback in my final chapter discussing the findings. The feedback they

provided was shared in both written and oral formats. Overall, my advisory group resonated strongly with the group experiential themes. They did recommend adjustments to the framing of the group experiential themes, as well as edits to my interpretative analysis that bracketed the quotes of the research participants. That feedback led to multiple edits of chapter 4 in subsequent drafts. The feedback of the advisory group gave me confidence in the validity of the themes that emerged from my analysis. I also condensed the findings into a concise executive summary. The purpose of this executive summary is to distill best practices and themes that emerge from interviews with senior administrators who actively participate in addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. The hope is that this executive summary will be useful to other senior administrators who are seeking to participate in this important work.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

I sought to make my data and findings trustworthy in several ways: member checking, researcher reflexive journaling, field notes, methodological triangulation, bracketing, and my advisory group. During the interviews, I probed participants for clarity on specific points, and I also sent copies of the transcripts to all participants so they could be checked for accuracy. I kept field notes during the interview to capture the contextual elements of the interview experience. I also kept a reflexive journal throughout the entire research process to maintain awareness and accountability. Finally, by completing interviews and scanning external data in news articles or published work, I sought to achieve methodological triangulation by having multiple data collection methods. The documents provided by the research participants helped to reinforce and

deepen the insights shared during the interview became an additional layer of methodological triangulation.

To ensure that I am transparent as a researcher, discussing my positions and relationships with my participants increased their confidence in the methods and findings of the study.

Bracketing my own experiences demonstrated that as a researcher, I have “taken care to limit the effects of [my] own perspective on the research [and remain] up-front about [my] perspectives so that readers can understand the findings as coming from a certain position” (Levitt, 2019, p. 21).

Since I do not identify as a woman or a person with a minoritized racial or ethnic identity, bracketing was also necessary. According to Smith et al. (2009), bracketing “shuts out from the phenomenological field the world as it exists for the subject in simple absoluteness” (p. 13).

My advisory group is a primary aspect of the trustworthiness for this study. This advisory group is a way by which I, as a White man, sought to steer this research towards prioritizing the perspectives of individuals with marginalized identities. This is a crucial first step in comprehending the intricacies of racism and initiating the journey towards equity and justice (Ladson-Billings, 2020). I gave my advisory group significant power for my research with a minimal amount of needed work on their part. The advisory group controlled the participants in the study and ultimately determined the usefulness of the findings, along with editorial control for any output of my research that might be shared publicly. Each advisory group member contributed approximately three to four hours to supporting this study. The importance of the advisory group for adding credibility and trustworthiness to my research is paramount. I think the time spent by my advisory group is worthy of compensation to acknowledge their expertise and efforts. This work should not be unpaid labor, which is sadly a common occurrence for

women and people of color in higher education. Therefore, I was able to provide each member of my advisory group with an honorarium of \$500.

Data Security

Data security is an important aspect of conducting ethical research and protecting study participants. In this study, which focuses on a subject matter that is sensitive and politically controversial, the importance of data security is elevated. It is important to consider not only the physical security of the data that were collected, but the digital security of the data as well. The nature of this study warranted a strategy for digital security of data that are collected and stored, and ultimately, how they are destroyed. For this study, once the interview data were collected, the transcripts as well as the documents provided were immediately secured in a password-encrypted private research folder on the North Carolina State administered and secured network. My plan for storing data securely has been approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). My secure digital research folder securely stores the deidentified transcripts of interviews, the documents provided by the research participants, and the digital NVIVO files used to analyze the data. Paper copies of these documents never existed.

Virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom, which is a web-based video communications tool. The University IRB has approved the use of Zoom as a secure and effective method of virtual data collection. In-person interviews were conducted in a private space selected by the research participant. I followed this same data security protocol for the conversations and documents with my advisory group. After this dissertation is complete, files will be permanently deleted from all systems through technical support that is provided by the university.

Limitations & Delimitations

A primary limitation for this study is that I was the only researcher, and the findings are limited to my ability and positionalities. Implicit biases and my own subjectivities, as a White man, inevitably influenced my actions. For example, I struggled with whether I can ethically use a critical theory like intersectionality without unintentionally colonizing a field of scholarship that is normally occupied by people of color. To mitigate this limitation, I sought and trusted the guidance of my dissertation committee and advisory group; however, this safeguard also has limitations, such as the amount of time available to give feedback and my own ability to understand and adjust to the feedback. Phenomenological research requires a bracketing of the researcher to set aside their own biases and experiences. IPA acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation and that my own experiences and biases could impact the interpretations (Smith & Nizza, 2022). While perfect bracketing is not possible, I practiced self-reflexivity through journaling, was as transparent as possible about my own positionality with my research participants, and I sought to faithfully process the data and feedback I received.

The main way I counteracted my own biases is a double layer of member checking. Once I organized the data from the transcripts and documents, I contacted all my research participants to ensure I adequately captured their experiences. Additionally, I shared the themes and insights with my advisory group, who added a second layer of member checking.

Another limitation is that IPA does not have a widely accepted approach to data analysis, which can make it difficult to compare any findings with other studies. In response to this limitation, I followed the well-known IPA approach of Smith and Nizza (2022). Jonathan Smith is a researcher who pioneered and established IPA as a research method and is widely respected

as the thought leader in this research method. His 2022 book with Isabella Nizza is the most recent published work outlining the steps and best practices for IPA.

Another limitation is that IPA researchers attempt to describe the experiences of research participants, often relying on abstract concepts such as emotions and feelings. Furthermore, to be effective in IPA research, I needed to establish a strong rapport with the research participants. Research participants need to feel comfortable enough to share intimate details. My positionality as someone who has been a higher education leader did allow me to connect quickly with other higher education leaders, and my background as a member of the clergy has given me significant practice in having conversations on topics that are sensitive and potentially emotionally charged. My perspective is that I was able to gain a good rapport with my research participants, and they all shared intimate and significant aspects regarding their work in higher education.

The primary delimitation is that the study focuses on senior administrators at four-year private and public PWI higher education institutions in North Carolina who are known for their work in dismantling inequities and addressing racial and gender disparities. This narrow scope will mean that many higher education leaders, even in the state of North Carolina, will not be included in this study. A broader sample size could produce different results but was outside the scope of IPA research and the possibilities of inclusion for a dissertation study.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data gathering instrument. For this study, my role included developing and facilitating the interview protocols as well as analyzing the qualitative data to determine themes and best practices that emerge from the data. As an IPA researcher, I engaged in a double hermeneutic, which required my interpretation of the participants' interpretation of their experiences. It was also my responsibility to protect my

participants from risk throughout and even beyond this study. To this end, I sought and received approval from NC State's IRB. The IRB process served as one step to protect the rights and privacy of the participants throughout the research process. I gave my participants anonymity, and I used pseudonyms to remove all identifying information to protect their identity. I did not begin the data collection process until I received IRB approval, and during and after the study I secured the data using best practices for data retention.

My role as the researcher also required me to have a role as the interviewer. I personally conducted all nine interviews – two of which were done in person and seven on Zoom. Once the interview had been scheduled with the research participants, a few days prior I sent a reminder along with the interview protocol so the participants would know what to expect. To prepare for the interview, I did some basic research of what was publicly available on the internet regarding the career backgrounds of each participant. I also skimmed recent publications of the participants to be familiar with their academic work. Before recording the interview, I asked general questions about the participants' life to put them at ease. I also briefly explained my research project and again explicitly asked for their consent to record prior to beginning the interview. I sensed a collegiality with all research participants, as we had a mutual connection of being higher education administrators, and they were all empathetic to my position as a graduate student who needed interviews to complete the data collection. After the interviews, many of the research participants thanked me for the opportunity to discuss the reasons and background for their work in higher education.

Positionality Statement

The reason I am passionate about this research topic is because I have aspired to do this work throughout my career. I have been a higher education professional for more than fifteen

years, and I have consistently witnessed the need for great leadership in higher education. I have also noticed the growing diversity of student populations and the expectation of diversity as a standard of excellence in higher education. Most of my key mentors have been women and/or people of color, and I have seen firsthand the incredible capacity they have had for higher education leadership, as well as the discrimination, inequities, and barriers they experienced because of their gender and/or racial identities. My personal mission motivates me to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate the disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education.

As a cisgender White heterosexual man, I am aware of how my social identity has provided me with opportunities for leadership. I also see the act of listening and seeking to understand the experiences of those who have different identities as a primary responsibility. As a first-generation college student diagnosed with Autism from a poor, rural area, I have often found myself outside of the “good ole’ boys club” and experienced invisible barriers to growth and development in higher education. This research aligns with a personal mission to remove as many of those invisible barriers as possible for other people and create spaces where a greater representation of people can flourish. Higher education has the enormous potential to demonstrate how to create a culture where a diverse representation of people can flourish in leadership positions, and this possibility propels me in this research.

Throughout my career, I have often felt frustrated that I am not making a bigger impact personally, and I am also slightly terrified that I will do more harm than good through attempting research that addresses the disparities and inequities I see. As a higher education administrator, I have hired approximately twenty people, most of whom identify as women and/or people of color. I have done my best to develop and invest in these people as future leaders, but I have

often felt inadequate in this task because there is no clear roadmap. I have also worked to dismantle systems that perpetuate inequities I discovered during my time in higher education leadership. For instance, during my tenure as the senior director of a graduate school's admissions and financial aid offices, I spearheaded the implementation of updated processes for application review and scholarship allocation, thereby promoting greater equity and justice for admission and scholarship offers. I want to grow in this area, and I have much to learn. It has come slowly, though I am convinced that it is more problematic for me to remain silent on the disparities and inequities that I see. I aspire toward action, and I want to ensure that the action is grounded in intentional and thoughtful research. Finally, I have two young daughters, and I want to live in a world where their gender will not limit the leaders that they can be.

Chapter Summary

In summary, I completed a qualitative, phenomenological study of senior administrators who demonstrate a peer-recognized ability to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. Recent academic literature centers on the voices of minoritized leaders and surfacing the specific challenges and disparities that exist. The literature also highlights the potential issues associated with prioritizing White men in this work. I have yet to see significant research that documents the experiences of how those in leadership positions who recognize this institutional challenge are moving forward to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems currently in place that perpetuate disparities and inequities. I used an advisory group to nominate participants and then conducted semi-structured interviews to distill the essence of my participants experiences. I also obtained documents from the research participants that reinforced the data from the interviews. I analyzed the data by following the IPA

method for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of their experiences and I filtered those findings through my advisory group. The next chapter provides the findings in the form of five group experiential themes.

Chapter 4: Results

This study explores the experiences of senior higher education administrators who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining systems that perpetuate disparities in higher education for minoritized leaders. The purpose is to gain insight into their experiences and reveal policies, practices, and strategies that are effective for confronting the disparities in leadership. This study provides an opportunity to understand the pathways to leadership for these senior administrators, the challenges they face, as well as the policies, processes and strategies they employ to move their organizations towards equity in leadership. This study shares diverse perspectives on the experiences of being a senior administrator in a North Carolina PWI higher education institution, along with insights into the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining systems that perpetuate disparities in leadership.

This qualitative study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of the senior higher administrators. The interpretative phenomenological approach offers a deeper understanding of why the senior administrators do the work they do, along with the practices, policies, and strategies used to move their higher education institutions toward being places where all people can flourish in leadership roles. The primary research tool this study employed to address the research questions was semi-structured one-on-one interviews. I also invited the participants to provide any relevant documentation including journal articles, news articles, and institutional documents such as written policies, strategic plans, or emails. After an in-depth review of the collected data, five group experiential themes emerged to capture the experiences of senior administrators who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining systems that perpetuate disparities in leadership. This chapter will provide an

overview of the participants in this study and then will share the five group experiential themes that emerged from my analysis of the data.

Participant Overview

This study consists of the stories, reflections, and writings of nine current senior administrators in North Carolina. The participants were all nominated by the advisory group supporting the study. The criteria given to the advisory group for nominating participants included the following: 1) Must be employed full-time as a senior higher education administrator (includes presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, deans, associate deans, provosts, etc.) at a four-year PWI institution in North Carolina; 2) must hold a Doctoral degree; 3) must have a minimum of five years of experience as a higher education senior administrator; and 4) must be recommended as someone who is actively engaged in the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education. The advisory group nominated fourteen total people. Invitations were sent to all fourteen nominees by email (see Appendix C for email invitations). Of the fourteen nominees, nine responded to the invitation and completed the informed consent form (found in Appendix B).

The data collection period took place between March 2025 and May 2025. During that time, each of the nine participants provided an in-depth semi-structured interview following the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Seven of the interviews took place over Zoom; two of the interviews were in person. Several of the participants also participated in follow-up conversations that took place through phone, email, and Zoom. Before and after the interview, all participants were invited to share anything written related to how the senior administrator attempted to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate

gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. The writing could be something published, or it could be any related documents like institutional emails, policies, or written protocols/handbooks/guides/standard operating procedures. Five of the nine provided a total of twenty-four additional artifacts for this study. Those artifacts included three policy documents, twelve news articles featuring the work of research participants, one podcast transcript, four published journal articles, and four transcripts or summaries of community conversations.

The nine participants are all current senior administrators at a four-year PWI higher education institution in North Carolina. Table 3 below provides an overview of all participants. To protect the identity of the participants and for the sake of confidentiality, all participants have a pseudonym, and any personally identifiable details have been adapted. The ages of the participants ranged from 40 to 55 years old, with two participants electing not to share information about their age. Six of the participants identified as female/woman/femme and three of the participants identified as male/cisgendered man. With regards to race and ethnicity, two of the participants identified as White, one identified as Latino heritage, White and Native (South), three identified as Black, one identified as Black/Afro-Caribbean American, one identified as Black/Non-Hispanic, and one identified as Black/African American. It is worth noting that none of the research participants identified as a White male. When I requested the advisory group to nominate participants, I did not specify any race/ethnicity and/or gender, so the absence of White male leadership is the result of the nomination process.

Table 3

Participant Profile Overview

Participant Name*	Age^	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Years of Higher Education Experience^
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Elijah Brooks		Black; African American	Cisgender Man		
James Carter		Black	Male		
Sophia Henderson		White	Female		
Amina Jordan		Black	Female		
Danielle Monroe		Black	Femme		
Rachel Morgan		White	Female		
Daniel Ortiz		Latino heritage, White and Native (South)	Male		
Nia Robinson		Black, Non- Hispanic	Female		
Kendra Wallace		Black / Afro- Caribbean American	Woman		

*To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms are used in place of real names.

^To further protect participants' identities, their ages and years of experience are omitted from publication.

As a group, the participants have significant higher education experience, ranging from 17 years of service up to 31 years. As a collective group, the participants have approximately 220 total years of working within higher education. Table 4 below provides an overview of the North Carolina higher education institutions where the participants are currently. Again, to protect the identities of the participants, the specific school names are not listed. The purpose of the table is

three-fold for understanding the context of the participants. First, while all the schools are PWI's in North Carolina, they all also have significant enrollment of people with minoritized racial and ethnic identities. Additionally, most of the schools have a noticeable majority of students who identify as female. The one exception, School C, has student population where males are the slight majority (50.3% of the overall population). Second, the participants come from a mix of public and private four-year institutions. And third, the participants are all working at large universities ranging in total enrollment from approximately 10,000 to 40,000 total students.

Table 4

*Racial & Enrollment Data of Participants Schools**

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
White	36%	54%	67%	78%	64%
Black/African American	8%	8%	6%	5%	7%
Asian	23%	15%	10%	2%	5%
Hispanic	11%	10%	9%	7%	10%
International	10%	5%	2%	2%	8%
Other/Unknown	11%	7%	6%	5%	7%
Gender Distribution	53.5% Female 46.5% Male	60.6% Female 39.4% Male	49.7% Female 50.3% Male	58.8%Female 41.2% Male	55.4% F 44.6% M
Public/Private	Private	Public	Public	Private	Private
Total Enrollment[^]	20,000	30,000	40,000	10,000	10,000

Source: www.usnews.com

*School names withheld to protect identity of the participants

^Rounded to the nearest 10,000 to protect identity of the participants

Participant Profiles

While all the participants share characteristics such as earning a doctoral degree and working as a senior administrator at a North Carolina PWI higher education institution, they also are distinct individuals with different pathways and stories. This section will provide a brief synopsis about each participant to provide context for their contribution to the forthcoming group experiential themes. Again, each participant has a pseudonym name, and I have altered any specific details of the individual for the purpose of providing confidentiality to the research participants. The individual profiles below provide a brief description of the participants' current role within higher education, as well as a short summary of how they ended up in their leadership role.

Kendra Wallace

As one of the youngest participants, Kendra Wallace is closer to the beginning of her professional career in academic administrative leadership. At the time of our interview, she had been serving as the faculty director of a leadership program embedded within a large, public North Carolina higher education institution. In addition to teaching leadership courses, Dr. Wallace oversees all aspects of the program including setting student learning outcomes and working with the faculty and staff that support the program. She is involved from the beginning to the end of the program including recruiting, admissions, matriculation, retention, graduation, and tracking student outcomes after leaving the program.

Dr. Wallace was raised in a household by parents who moved to the United States from a Caribbean country for educational and social mobility opportunities and instilled in her the

importance of education. Her dad, who worked in education, was a primary influence and helped to plant the seed that “college campuses were like [her] other home” (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025). She initially went to school with an interest in STEM and pursuing a medical career, but she found herself perpetually drawn toward education. While in college she enjoyed a role as being resident assistant and the Vice President of Student Affairs served as a mentor for her. After a brief stint as a first-grade teacher, Dr. Wallace returned to grad school focused on educational leadership and development. Her career path has spanned both the student affairs and academic affairs areas of higher education. She believes focusing on development both inside and outside of the classroom is a key to success for students, and she sees part of her unique contribution to higher education is holding both together.

While Dr. Wallace is closer to the beginning of her career as an administrative leader in higher education, she does have big aspirations for leadership in the future. Near the end of our interview, I asked her an imagination question about how she would spend her time differently if she could focus all her time on addressing leadership disparities for women and people of color. After pausing for a moment, she gave this response:

I'm not gonna stifle my thought here. I like do have a desire to be a dean one day, specifically, of a school of education, school, college, whatever, um... I love students so much... Or I just really see the promise of education in what I would believe a very realistic way. And I, I, I feel confident that this unique view of like, being able to see academics and then also see student development could truly be a really good mix for a dean. And I also believe that, like, what we're what we missed out on are people in the rooms who are making decisions who can see that way. (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025).

Dr. Wallace provided input as someone who is thinking long term about administrative leadership, and who is already leading a program focused on leadership development in innovative ways.

Amina Jordan

While Kendra Wallace aspires to be a dean, Amina Jordan has been the dean of a college within a large university for the past three years. Her role is to essentially work with all the faculty and staff within her college and provide them with the support they need, as well as opportunities for growth and development. Recognizing that staff are often seen as second class citizens to faculty, Dr. Jordan is intentional in providing opportunities for development specifically for staff members in her college. She has been at the public university where she currently serves for several decades now. She initially came to the university as a faculty member in the liberal arts. Prior to that, she was a faculty member for approximately ten years at several other higher education institutions in the United States. Dr. Jordan has some of the most experience within higher education out of all the research participants. After spending most of her career as a professor, Dr. Jordan was recruited to administrative leadership roles, and the common thread for all her administrative roles is leadership development.

Dr. Jordan is the only participant born outside of the United States. She was born, raised, and lived her early adult years in a West African country. Like Dr. Wallace, Dr. Jordan names her parents as primary influencers that led to her pathway in education. Her dad was an educator in her home West African country and her parents always sacrificed whatever it took to ensure that she and her siblings always had the opportunity to access education. While in school, she fell in love with literature, and love for literature drove her to pursue a career in higher education. Dr. Jordan also credits her mother for her ability to overcome gender stereotypes or limitations.

Thanks to her mother, Dr. Jordan intuitively rejects any form of gender discrimination and is intrinsically confident of her capacity for leadership. Dr. Jordan has published many articles describing how she has addressed and overcome gender, racial, and cultural discrimination. In addition to sharing published journal articles for this study, Dr. Jordan also contributed significant wisdom to the conversation around leadership development in higher education.

Danielle Monroe

Along with Kendra Wallace, Danielle Monroe is one of the younger participants. Also, like Dr. Wallace, Dr. Monroe is in her first significant administrative leadership role. For the past several years, she has been serving as the director of a cultural center that provides support to a minoritized student population as well as resources for the entire campus at a large PWI public university. She sees supporting and serving students as her primary audience, but recognizes that to do this well, she needs to collaborate and connect with faculty and staff across the university. During her interview, she described herself as a “Black feminist world builder” (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025) and described the work that she is doing through the lens of academic theory (i.e. Black Feminist Thought) throughout the interview in a way that distinguished her from the other research participants. When I asked about influential people in her life, while she did mention some friends and mentors, she primarily spoke about the influence of Black feminist thought leaders.

Dr. Monroe’s pathway to administrative higher education leadership was a series of job opportunities working in student support. As an undergraduate student, she had a work study position in a student union. Immediately following her undergrad experience, she took a temporary job working in a student center and “fell in love with the work of supporting students” (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025). From there she took a variety of higher education

roles that gave her a wide view of supporting students outside the classroom. She eventually pursued a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling and worked for a season as a mental health counselor in higher education. Her interest in supporting students through higher education administration eventually led her to a PhD program and her current role running a cultural center. Dr. Monroe added helpful insights into how an administrative leader can move theory to practice, as she perpetually thinks about how to practically apply the theory of Black Feminist Thought to the work she does within the university.

Daniel Ortiz

Daniel Ortiz holds one of the highest levels of leadership among the research participants and has been in his current role the longest of any participant. He is a Vice President for a large, private higher education institution. He describes his work as having three buckets of programs, policies, and practices. He oversees the programs for professional development opportunities for all faculty and staff at his university. He uses most of his time influencing the policy of the university, and he also oversees a staff of approximately fifteen people and works with the president and provost on institutional leadership. Dr. Ortiz aptly summarizes his work with a quote found on his whiteboard that his “office helps ensure that every person [at our university] has access to all that [our university] has to offer” (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025).

Like Danielle Monroe, his background is in mental health counseling. As a minority at a PWI higher education in the Southern United States, he first learned about disparities through studying race and mental health outcomes. He pursued a path addressing those disparities through doctoral work and became a school counselor and academic professor. Most of his academic career was as a professor, and he had no aspirations to do anything besides being a professor. He describes himself as an “accidental administrator” (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March

25, 2025) as a little more than ten years ago a colleague nominated him for a new university dean position focused on diversity and equity in faculty recruitment and governance. From there, he discovered he enjoyed working across the university with faculty, staff, and students, and his leadership continued expanding to his current position as a vice president. Dr. Ortiz added an enormous amount of experience in addressing, dismantling, and reimaging systems in his university that contribute to leadership disparities.

Nia Robinson

Nia Robinson serves as a Vice Chancellor at a large, private institution with multiple campuses. Dr. Robinson is the most seasoned of the participants, both in terms of age and in terms of higher education experience. She has held a variety of roles across several significant higher education institutions in North Carolina and brought to her interview a depth of experience and variety of roles focused on issues of equity. She was also the most prolific in terms of providing additional documentation for consideration with this study. I invited all participants to submit documents that highlight the work that they have been doing to address disparities in leadership opportunities. Dr. Robinson submitted fifteen total documents including journal articles, other interviews, and news articles featuring her work – far more documents than any other research participant, which again points to her significant experience.

In her role, Dr. Robinson has the task of shaping diversity, equity, and inclusion across the multi-site university. As a first-year college student, she claims that she “chose higher education, but I think it also chose me” (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025). As a Black woman who has been in PWI higher education institutions her entire life, she found herself continuously drawn to seeking a place at the table where higher education decisions were being made and being asked by others who share some of her identities to be the voice that had been

overlooked or ignored in the past. Over her significant career she has held a variety of roles from leading cultural centers, being a professor, academic leadership, and roles specifically focused on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The consistent theme that ties all of Dr. Robinson's work together is seeking to advocate for marginalized people in the higher education institutions where she found herself.

Elijah Brooks

Elijah Brooks is a Vice President at a private higher education university in North Carolina. He is also a professor of education at his institution. Of all my research participants, Dr. Brooks had the most clarity on the approach he takes to the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimaging higher education systems that perpetuate leadership disparities. A primary function of his role is to provide a vision for inclusive excellence. He helped to lead a university wide initiative to develop a process for addressing matters of equity on his campus. That process was then codified in a variety of university wide communication efforts, and the university has a coherent campus wide strategic plan for moving toward equity and justice. His work is now bearing remarkable fruit, as he was able to provide additional documentation demonstrating that a quorum of his campus is bought into striving for inclusive excellence.

Dr. Brooks likes to tell people as a joke that "I came out of the womb doing this particular work, but also there's some truth to that as well" (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025). He came from a low income, single parent household. He did well in school and always found himself in leadership positions. He wanted more than his small, rural hometown had to offer and became a first-generation college student. He attended a private all-male PWI college in the Southeast where he was one of fifteen total Black students. He intuitively began advocating for his undergrad to be a place where he felt like he belonged, so he began creating

programs and asking for additional programs to be added that would add a more multi-cultural lens to the educational environment. After leaving undergrad, he was a high school teacher for a few years until the president of his undergrad recruited him back to launch an inaugural diversity program. That pattern of higher education leaders seeking out Dr. Brooks to occupy newly created roles focused on diversity and inclusive excellence continued throughout his career, including the role he presently has. He has put an emphasis on racial equity in all the various roles he has held in higher education.

Sophia Henderson

Sophia Henderson is one of two White females to participate in this research study. She is currently the Assistant Vice Provost of a large, private PWI. Her role largely focuses on addressing issues of equity in the classroom, as well as supporting first generation and under-resourced undergraduate students. She fosters community building between faculty and students to reduce barriers to thriving for students, particularly first generation and low-income students. She also teaches occasionally in the history and political science departments.

Dr. Henderson comes from a highly patriarchal religious background and had parents who placed a high importance on education. She pursued higher education without clear goals in mind other than following her intellectual curiosity. All along the way she had women mentors who encouraged her to continue in her education and seek administrative leadership. She eventually earned a PhD, though immediately knew that being a professor was not her preferred career pathway. She also saw being a mother as a key part of her life calling, and this led her to taking an entry level administrative job in higher education following the completion of her PhD. Dr. Henderson and Dr. Robinson were the only two participants to discuss how they integrate their identity as a parent into their administrative leadership roles within higher education. That

first administrative role for Dr. Henderson kept leading to other opportunities, and she found herself drawn to administrative roles that allowed her to support vulnerable student populations. Providing that support, advocating, and creating new opportunities for people who do not have backgrounds of privilege is a throughline for the career work of Dr. Henderson in higher education.

Rachel Morgan

Rachel Morgan is the other research participant who identifies as a White female. She also holds a distinct administrative role compared to her peer participants in this study. Dr. Morgan is in athletic higher education administration at a large, private PWI. Athletics is a significant aspect of higher education, particularly at universities with large enrollments. Dr. Morgan's role oversees the student-athlete experience at her school, and she reports directly to the Athletic Director. She also holds the role of Senior Woman Administrator, which is a role required for all NCAA Division I schools. This designated role started in 1975 and was implemented with Title IX to ensure women would be at the table to influence guidelines, rules, and regulations for all non-revenue sports (i.e. everything but football and basketball).

Dr. Morgan spent most of her adolescent life aspiring to be a teacher. During her time in college, she discovered that teaching would not be a viable career pathway. While she was never a student athlete herself, she did have a passion for sports and gravitated toward sports marketing and management. Eventually, she took a role as a tutor for student athletes, which was a perfect marriage of her interest in education and sports. She eventually moved into athletic administration and gained more responsibility overseeing the totality of the student-athlete experience. Of all the research participants, Dr. Morgan was the most reluctant to recognize any role she plays in moving her institution toward equity in leadership opportunities. She openly

questioned her participation in the study by wondering if she had anything meaningful to contribute. She then also shared with me that her department asked her to lead the strategic planning efforts related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. She reluctantly accepted that role only on the condition that she could co-lead the efforts with one of her Black colleagues. Despite her hesitation, Dr. Morgan provided key insights and a distinctive vantage point of higher education administration work.

James Carter

James Carter is an Associate Dean at a large, public PWI. A particular aspect of his role is to monitor student success and retention measures and implement programming to improve student success and retention. He also provides support to faculty and staff for the purpose of creating an environment where faculty, staff, and students feel welcome and like they have the potential to be effective and thrive. Dr. Carter, who identifies as a Black male, has significant experience in higher education leadership.

Dr. Carter shared that he came from a “low-income background, non-traditional academic environment” (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025). By “non-traditional,” he means that he grew up in a land locked city in the deep South. As a child, he became enamored by a television program featuring the ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau. That fascination led him as a first-generation college student to pursue marine sciences in graduate work that resulted in a PhD. Dr. Carter went to an HBCU for undergrad, but then to PWI’s for graduate school. He was often one of the only Black students in his graduate programs. After serving in a faculty role for many years, Dr. Carter said he went into administrative leadership role “kicking and screaming” (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025). He did not want to deal with the bureaucratic limitations that would come with being in leadership. However, he kept receiving invitations to be in

administrative leadership roles. While he experienced challenges due to his racial identity and background, he also recognizes that he had great mentors and people who provided opportunities and access for him. With time, he has come to see his administrative leadership roles as a way for him to give back by providing opportunities and access for others, including people with non-traditional backgrounds.

The backgrounds of the nine research participants provide a key aspect of the context for the findings of this study. Their responses to the interview questions were a blend of personal and professional, and their backgrounds and experiences shaped the stories and insights obtained during the data collection phase of this study. All nine of these senior higher education leaders provided in-depth interviews, as well as twenty-four related documents. After a careful analysis of the data, themes emerged from the data. Those themes are the focus of the following section.

Group Experiential Themes

After analyzing the data and completing the coding phases as outlined in Smith and Nizza (2022), five major group experiential themes emerged in response to the research questions of this study:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, practices, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

The five themes emerged from a thorough and in-depth analysis of nine interviews and twenty-four submitted artifacts from the participants. Table five below provides an overview of the five group experiential themes and their associated sub-headings.

Table 5

Group Experiential Themes Overview and Associated Sub-Headings

Group Experiential Theme	Associated Sub-Heading
Pressure of the Political Climate	<i>Words You Cannot Say Lack of Funding Eliminating Programs Addressing the Anti-DEI Political Climate</i>
Macro Impact of Microaggressions	<i>I Wish I Were Black: Microaggressions Based on Race/Ethnicity Pet to Threat: Microaggressions Based on Gender Getting 'Willy-Nilly': Second-hand Microaggressions through Witness</i>
Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset	<i>Convening Conversations around Food Dignity, Love, and Courage Listening to Learn The Wisdom of the Pause</i>
Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems	<i>Data is the Why: Using Data to Advocate for those who Need Support Influencing and Implementing Policy Processes to Maximize Participation & Buy-in Strategies to Support Full Participation Strategic Plans Recognition through Awards Storytelling</i>
Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans	<i>Opportunities and Access for All Expansive Mentoring '10 Toes Down' Support</i>

The central and overarching theme of this study is *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset*. The senior administrators have thought deeply about what it means to be a good human and apply the best of what it means to be a human to their work in higher education. This study had a particular focus on the policies, processes, and strategies

utilized. Again, the policies, processes, and strategies described by the research participants are all designed to humanize higher education systems. Those insights are captured in the theme *Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*. A primary way that the senior administrators are humanizing higher education is creating an environment that seeks to include everyone in the community. The theme *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans* provides an overview of this approach to giving and receiving support. The senior administrators of this study are operating in remarkably challenging circumstances. They are facing immense external pressure as the current moment has intense scrutiny on attempts to address disparities and inequities in higher education. The theme *Pressure of the Political Climate* summarizes some of the experiences of the research participants. The higher education leaders in this study are also experiencing and/or witnessing microaggressions because of their race/ethnicity and/or gender. Those microaggressions have a compounding impact, and this phenomenon is illustrated in the theme *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*.

In the next section, I will present a comprehensive description of the themes developed through an interpretative and thorough analysis of the data. I will use direct quotations from participant interviews and their artifacts to connect their experiences to the emergent themes. *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset* is the most central and overarching theme of the entire study. However, to tell the story in the best way possible, it will be important to first establish the challenging context that these senior administrators are operating within. Therefore, I will begin first with the themes of *Pressure of the Political Climate* and *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*. The senior administrators are all facing significant obstacles, and those obstacles and the pressure they face noticeably increased during the period of this study. First establishing the challenging work context will illuminate the

remarkable work and experiences of the senior administrators highlighted in the themes of *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset, Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*, and *Creating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans*.

Pressure of the Political Climate

In the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020 and the subsequent protests demanding racial equity, higher education experienced wave of activity designed to address systemic racism and racial inequities. Promises were made, anti-racist statements were drafted, new programs were implemented, and new positions were created as a reaction to address matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). However, that momentum was short-lived, and within a few years, the pendulum swung the other way. One major turning point was the 2023 United States Supreme Court Decisions *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina*. Those two Supreme Court decisions were to strike down the affirmative action policies at Harvard College and the University of North Carolina (Hlavac & Fegely, 2023). The practical effect of that decision was to eliminate the ability of colleges and universities to use race-based policies or affirmative action programs during the admissions process.

Since 2023, DEI bans have started to proliferate on both the state and federal level. This has led to the questioning of DEI-related work along with the need to rebrand or eliminate DEI work. In the state of North Carolina, back in 2019 the Board of Governors approved a requirement that all public higher education institutions must hire a chief diversity officer and meet other related goals. By 2021, the UNC educational system had developed diversity and inclusion metrics. The winds began shifting, and in 2024, the Board of Governors voted to repeal

the 2019 policies and approved a new “equality” policy that guided institutions to stay neutral on political controversies. As of August 2025, schools in the UNC System have removed curriculum requirements, removed DEI programs and language from public facing materials, eliminated 59 DEI positions and realigned 131 others (Gretzinger & Hartman, 2025). Two of the participants in the study at public institutions were among the 131 who had their positions realigned within the past few years.

Federal policy is putting increasing pressure on higher education to comply with a concentrated effort to remove all DEI initiatives. In July of 2025, the United States Department of Justice declared that diversity, equity and inclusion practices are unlawful and “discriminatory” (Alonso, 2025). The Department of Justice is playing an increasing role in investigating colleges that may be in violation because of DEI programs and efforts to boost diversity among faculty and staff. The federal government is withholding and threatening to withhold federal grant funding for higher education institutions that do not comply with new federal mandates. A growing anti-DEI movement has impacted all higher education by enforcing compliance with enacted laws and framing DEI work as not appropriate or preemptively unlawful.

This political climate puts enormous pressure on senior administrators engaged in equity work. A recent qualitative study of forty Chief Diversity Officers across the United States demonstrates how some senior administrators navigate the impact of the current political climate. The study found that the Chief Diversity Officers experienced “negative mental and physical health outcomes due to job insecurity, professional isolation, and personal attacks” (Grim, et. al., 2025, p.5). As I conducted the interviews, it became obvious to me that the participants were

displaying bravery and courage by doing the work that they do, and merely for their willingness to talk with me about it.

All research participants asked questions about my plans for securing the data and deidentifying the transcript from our conversation. One participant brought to the interview a copy of a recent strategic plan that this participant helped to craft but was hesitant to share it with me due to the political climate. Eventually, the participant did decide to give me a copy, and I was able to later confirm that the strategic plan was publicly available on the institution's website at the time of the interview. One participant reached out to me a few weeks after our interview to ask for more details about how I was securing the data and my plans for using it. This participant shared with me a recent news article where an undercover reporter caught a North Carolina higher education administrator describing how DEI efforts have continued despite the recent policy changes from the Board of Governors. This person lost their job, and it was unsettling enough to the research participant that they wanted to talk with me and be reassured that our conversation would remain confidential. It is impossible to tell the story of the research participants without first acknowledging the influence of the current political climate. The following sections provide nuance to the specific experiences of the senior administrators in this study.

Words You Cannot Say

A consistent point in all the interviews where the influence of the current political climate became obvious was in the research participant's reaction to the question "How do you define equity and justice in the context of higher education?" This question is directly from Kezar and Posselt's (2020) equity and justice framework that advocates for clear definitions of equity and justice because "shared understandings and explicit definitions of guiding principles

are critical for effective action” (p.6). Kendra Wallace responded quickly to that question by saying “Words I can’t say!” before defining equity as “everyone has the same access to opportunities” (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025).

With a similar sentiment, Daniel Ortiz also acknowledged that equity and justice are words that he is not supposed to say and that some people with minoritized racial identities also have challenges with defining equity as access to opportunities. He provides a crisp and simple definition for each within the challenging political context with the following response,

Opportunity and access. Some people don't like the word access. That's fine.

Unfortunately, that's made it onto Ted Cruz's list of words I'm not supposed to use.

Incidentally, access is also a word that a lot of people of color don't like either, because it implies that they have very little agency, and unless somebody grants them access, they can't get access. And that makes some people feel upset, and I don't think they're wrong in feeling upset, but I do think it ultimately that's what equity and justice is about. (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

He later said that the current pushback over the word ‘equity’ is likely temporary, as well as a need to continue innovating the language,

And people get hung up on equity today the way that they never have, or at least they haven't for the last, I don't know, 20 or 30 years. And eventually they'll either get over equity or they'll find something else. So if people don't like the word equity or inclusion, fine. Access and opportunity. And if and when those words find some sort of demonization, we'll find another. (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

Similarly, Nia Robinson also acknowledges the challenges of even saying the words ‘equity’ and ‘justice’ before providing clear definitions,

Can we even say [those words]? No, we're saying it. But for me, equity means providing people, systems, things, places, with what they what they need to be successful. It does not advantage or disadvantage someone else. It is simply giving you what's needed to compete, to show up, to be able to thrive, and the justice for me is actually doing it, and not just recognizing the need for it, but actually taking the steps of ownership to enact and ensure that it happens. And how are, how are we doing it in honoring ways and honoring methods, and not making someone feel either isolated or stigmatized, but in a humane way. And how we how we do that, not only what we do, but how we do it, I think is most important. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

Sophia Henderson had the most demonstrative reaction to the question of defining equity and justice by giving a hearty, boisterous laugh and acknowledging the rebellious nature of defining such words in this current political climate. She responded to the question by saying,

[Laughs] Yeah, you know, I haven't changed my definition, even though I might get in trouble. I mean equity is not about making things equal, right? Like equity is about changing on ramps and providing opportunities for folks who haven't had those to get to the same place. So when I think about equity and justice in higher ed, I often think about the work I do with first-generation, low-income students. (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

She goes on to describe the importance of creating opportunities for a diversity of people, as some of the biggest disasters she has witnessed in higher education have been the result of people in positions of power merely attempting to replicate themselves and the creation of echo chambers where no diversity of thought exists.

In summary, the noticeable reaction across the participants to what could arguably be the most direct and straightforward question in my interview protocol points to the challenging realities the current political climate is creating. At the time of the interview, the participants acknowledged the challenge while also recognizing the need to define and redefine the ideas of equity and justice to best serve the people in their sphere of influence.

Lack of Funding

One consequence of the current political climate is the challenges it creates for funding the work of creating opportunities for access, particularly for people who have historically not had access to higher education. Several of the participants brought up the issue of funding and the challenging impact of a reduction or loss of funding. To begin, Amina Jordan acknowledged the importance of funding to effectively do the work,

I think one cannot focus on inequities without thinking about funding and how funding is distributed across the college. Because for me, funding, funding is a big issue, especially when you think about inequities that are not about well-being and belonging and wellness. Many of the inequities that involve other matters involve funding, and when one doesn't have the funding, then one can't really resolve some of the issues that you know, that come across, you know, come across our table. And another thing for me would be the issue of representation. Funding is a big thing. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

In the current political environment, DEI work is labeled as wasteful spending and efforts to eliminate any funding related to DEI work are seen as critical cost saving measures. James Carter pointed out the hypocrisy of this line of thinking,

I think on the UNC Board of Governors website, there's their, you know, all the evidence that they use to eliminate all of this wasteful DEI spending stuff, right? I think Speaker Tim Moore quoted that we spent over \$95 million on DEI last year, or whatever else, or right before the elimination came down. So that, so that report has all the different colleges within the UNC... all the different universities within the UNC system on it and their level of spending. Our spending on DEI was 1/10 of 1% of the entire University's entire budget. Oh, I'm sorry, not even 1/10 of 1%. So again, you know we do, I mean, we profess we care about it as something that's really important. It wasn't our strategic plan until that was required to be changed as well too. But we depend on you to make these changes out of your own good graces. (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

Earlier in the interview James Carter expressed skepticism that the DEI mandates and declaration in the wake of George Floyd's murder would lead to any meaningful change because the resources were never fully provided. He then followed that observation up with the quote above, where he revealed that a fraction of a percent of the UNC System budget presently goes to DEI funding, and even that small amount is under threat.

Nia Robinson provided an artifact of a recently published journal article she helped to co-author where she and a team of others interviewed student affairs staff who work in identity-based centers. The article examines the impact of anti-DEI legislation on the staff members. The theme of funding was also identified in this study. The article includes quotes from student affairs staff who were grappling with the emotional impact of being on the receiving end of budget cuts targeted at spaces where historically marginalized students found refuge and connection. The article highlighted how anti-DEI legislation undermines the foundational support structures that have historically fostered community and belonging to marginalized

students. Dr. Robinson's article and the convergence of concern about a lack of funding points to this issue of funding being a broader concern across higher education in this current political climate (N. Robinson, Artifact #6, Journal Article).

Within this overall experiential theme of a lack of funding, several of the participants acknowledged specific ways funding impacts students and contributes to inequities. James Carter pointed out the inequity of how graduate students are funded,

You know our graduate students are basically paid poverty wages right now. And you know trying to make sure that those voices and we know whether that's speaking up in our in our meetings across campus, or senate meetings or what have you just about these issues. It's an opportunity to let folks know that we can no longer... I think a lot of faculty are so removed from the days when we were graduate student. You know our graduate students are, you know... They're really below poverty wages here and this area is very expensive, and then ask these students to still be high achieving and have high output when you know they can't put gas in their car tanks, they can't pay their rents, they can't eat regularly, or they have to make decisions like, "Hey, if I'm going to have a big meal today, I can't have a big meal tomorrow. It's just not within the budget." (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

Likewise, Sophia Henderson has noticed the disparities between students and their relative wealth, and echoes how faculty are often removed from the difficult financial realities of low-income students. She told a story to illustrate this point,

I had a faculty member this semester, who had the students download this math software that actually, like the kids use this phrase, it "bricked" their MacBooks so, like, it made them unusable, like they are bricks now. And the faculty's response was, "well just get on

Amazon and get another one.” The audacity of that was out of... Totally out of hand. And when I sat with her and was like, “do you understand, like the \$2,000 to buy a MacBook for some students, yeah, that's nothing, but for others, like, that's their total income for the month? For their family!” Like, it's unacceptable to make those sort of assumptions about the wealth of our students. (S. Henderson, Interview #7, April 9, 2025)

In a challenging political environment, the issue of funding quickly rises to the surface. Wealth inequality is a reality for many students when they arrive at college and presents obstacles to thriving as a student. Anti-DEI legislation is now moving to reduce or eliminate the support structures designed to benefit the most financially vulnerable students.

Eliminating Initiatives

In addition to a lack of funding, the influence of the current political climate is causing programs or initiatives that address disparities within higher education to be diluted or eliminated. Nia Robinson told a cohesive story that illustrates a common life cycle of DEI programming efforts in higher education over the past several years. The cycle begins when institutions acknowledge disparity and then make bold declarations along with clear mandates to address it,

When I was at [Piedmont University] and following the murder of George Floyd, Piedmont, like any other institution of higher education and businesses and corporations, everyone was trying to assume this reckoning that was happening and acknowledgement that, “Oh, we really do have a race problem in the United States.” And so our chancellor at Piedmont was like, you know, we're going to do something at Piedmont, and I can remember we were sheltering in place already, so I'm at home, and I got a gchat from my boss, and she said the chancellor is getting ready to send out communication about

mandatory training in DEI at [Piedmont], and he wanted to start in August. And by mandatory training, he means for our unit to do it. And by way of this, I mean you. And I was like, "Whoa, okay, so within 30 minutes, here's this beautiful communication that comes out about, you know who we are at Piedmont, and what we value, and that in August, we're going to start having mandatory training for faculty and staff and students. And it was a dream, right? Because all along, we've always wanted things need to be mandatory, like I have to do mandatory training at [my university] for ergonomics. I had to do mandatory training for fire safety. And even though I was there 12 years, we had one fire. How many of us can count? How many race equity, gender inequity concerns that we've witnessed over the years? So here we are at [Piedmont University]. We get this mandatory training. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

After the mandate comes out, the next stage of the life cycle is the launching of the initiative. Starting anything new in an institution always has initial challenges, and the institution can overcome those challenges if the senior leadership continues to support it. The final stage is the reaction against the initiative that creates barriers and eventually leads to the dilution or elimination of the initiative.

We work really hard with an external vendor, me and my team, [my colleague] was one of them, to get this mandatory training going. Get it all set up. You start it, it's going well, other than some technical issues that anybody has. Change your browser, clear your cache, all those kind of things. But we're rocking. We're going through it. And then one of the first-year students that had a parent that was a member of the legislature for Piedmont got wind of it, and like "Here, they're making us do this training." And the legislature member got wind of it and started reaching out back to Piedmont. "Why are

we doing this? Why are we making people do this? You shouldn't be doing this. This is, you know, over stepping." And so it went from mandatory, to strongly encourage, to "We really hope you do it," to take it off the website. If people ask about it, send them the link, but otherwise, bury it. And this all happened within about a four-to-five-month span. And we knew how hard we worked for but more so, how did we move just from something that was so paramount to because of our location in the state, we gotta take it down. And that was that was a real hard thing, because it was a policy that was created and then a policy undone. And now we look what you know five years later, when we have trigger words that we can't have, the whole unit that I worked in was dismantled. The team that I had was dismantled. The work has been whitewashed, and so, and much of what I did for that amount of time was gone. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

Within this story you can hear Dr. Robinson's lament that the program she built was systematically dismantled. It is disheartening and demotivating to senior administrators to have programs and initiatives they pioneer be undermined, neglected, or destroyed due to the changing winds of the political climate.

The journal article recently co-authored by Nia Robinson also noted how the political climate whitewashes or eliminates DEI initiatives. It shared examples from interview participants who had to go through all their public facing web pages to delete the words 'diversity, equity, and inclusion.' Another interview participant described going before an institutional committee that reviewed all their work and erased the truth in response to White fragility. The journal article summarizes that the overall impact of the anti-DEI political climate on DEI initiatives is that it ultimately undermines efforts to liberate students on college campuses (N. Robinson, Artifact #6, Journal Article).

Addressing the Anti-DEI Political Climate

While women and people of color have always experienced challenges and discrimination in higher education in the United States, this moment with anti-DEI legislation and demonization of DEI work is presenting a distinct challenge. Research participants were grappling with the reality of what is happening and beginning to lean into what needs to come next. In the wake of political changes, Daniel Ortiz realized that language needs to be updated and simplified. In reflecting on how we got to this point, he said,

We over thought it. We took a Bronfenbrenner approach to politics, and the other party took a Maslow approach to politics, and they honed in on shelter and psychological safety. Period. And so at the end of the day, it came down to scaring you that the immigrants are coming for your rights, or the trans people are going to take your children, or you'd have to pay \$6 for eggs. And we got so, rightfully so, caught up in the importance of the meso system and the macro system, in the micro system. And nobody understood that, but people really did understand this idea of being scared. And so why do I give you this lecture on that? We're going to not only are we going to need to ground whatever it is we do in a conceptual framework. We've been doing that here for five years. It's going to need to be a simplified framework. I'm sorry, but it's... If we want to continue to do this work, we are going to have to entertain the idea of simplifying it. (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

In this quote, Dr. Ortiz points out contrasting communication styles between the opposite ends of the political spectrum. Anti-DEI efforts weaponized simple and fear-based language. Dr. Ortiz recognizes that grounding the work of creating opportunities and expanding access will require a simplified framework.

In response to the current political climate, Elijah Brooks convened a campus conversation that took place in December of 2024. The conversation was designed to be an event where faculty, staff, and administrators could sit together around tables and discuss their shared responsibility for inclusive excellence. Over 100 people showed up for this voluntary conversation. One theme of the conversation was a concern about how the political climate may undermine enthusiasm for inclusive excellence efforts. The group came up with a goal to “create an environment where inclusive excellence feels safe, supported, and a priority for all” (E. Brooks, Artifact 1, Campus Conversation Summary). The group also made the following suggestions for achieving this goal,

- Institutional Commitment Statements: Issue clear, visible statements from senior leadership affirming Inclusive Excellence as central to the university’s mission, regardless of external pressures.
- Policy Advocacy and Support: Provide faculty and staff with resources to understand legal protections and institutional policies that support DEI work.
- Promote Open Dialogue: Establish safe spaces or forums where faculty and staff can discuss their concerns, share experiences, and co-create solutions. (E. Brooks, Artifact 1, Campus Conversation Summary)

It is yet to be seen how the campus will be able to fully navigate political pressures as they increase. For Dr. Brooks institution, a starting point is creating public space as an institution to dialogue about what is happening and what can be done about it.

In conclusion, it is impossible to understand the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity without acknowledging the current political climate. The political climate rapidly oscillates, and the current moment is producing a combative and potentially

destructive climate to do the work of promoting equity. Legislation on a state and federal level is making even the use of words like 'equity' illegal. The political climate is leading to a lack of or elimination of funding for jobs and programming and is also leading to initiatives being diluted or cancelled. The senior administrators are in the early stages of determining how to address the climate and reimagine their work. The political climate is not the only challenge senior administrators face. The next theme will center on another challenging reality for the senior administrators in this study: their encounters with microaggressions.

Macro Impact of Microaggressions

Another impactful aspect of the context for all research participants is the reality of microaggressions. "Microaggression" is a term first coined by Chester Pierce, a Harvard psychiatrist, in the 1970's. The term refers to "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, et. al., 1978, p. 66). Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to others. While Pierce originally used the term in connection with race, the term has since been expanded to encompass subtle slights to other marginalized groups, such as those based on gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability.

All the research participants identified themselves with a marginalized race/ethnicity and/or gender. As a part of the interview, all of them directly or indirectly brought up microaggressions as a part of their experiences, whether it is something they experienced personally or something they witnessed. In some cases, microaggressions were brought up more generally, like this observation from Elijah Brooks,

Someone in a meeting is making a point, and then you know someone of a minoritized identity is sharing content, and it's not being received well or being interrogated in a way

where someone from another identity, from a dominant identity, and it's very well accepted. And it's like the most brilliant thing that has ever been stated when you know, 10 minutes earlier this other person has said that. So you have things from that. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

In other cases, participants had specific stories to share about their own experiences of either personally receiving microaggressions or witnessing colleagues receiving them. The sections below will share some of the specific stories of microaggressions experienced by the research participants.

Evident in the stories from participants is the *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*. While microaggressions are subtle, individualized events, they stack up over time to have a compounding effect. The impact of microaggressions over time on an individual, which is then compounded with the collection of all individual experiences, creates a macro effect on the culture. Microaggressions become a part of the air that is breathed in the higher education environment where people, specifically women and people of color, have their qualifications questioned, their self-worth denied, and their dignity refused. Amina Jordan captures this well with the following confession,

It's very interesting how, for me, it's not the large issues that everyone recognizes as discrimination and inequality, inequities in higher education, as much as those really mundane little things that cumulatively are so destructive and so traumatic, right? And when you accumulatively put those little, little micro aggressions, which are not really little in the sense that the impact ends up being really great. You know, it makes it a lot easier to pinpoint and recognize discrimination and inequities in ways that many people would not recognize, you know, at all you see. Yeah, so, and I think in higher education,

that happens quite a bit, you know, where people notice the big things, you know. This memo that came down from this from the system, or this executive order that was signed the other day, or this memo that has come from the chancellor's office. People notice that immediately, but it is the things that happen internally, in our day-to-day encounters that are even more problematic for me in higher education than those memos that come down where one has to comply anyway. If the system office says you have to do this, they will find ways to comply that is totally different from the kinds of discriminations that happen on a daily, minute basis systemically, you know, that don't go away, but that don't make things better either, you know. Those are the much more difficult things you know, you know, to talk about, to transform, you know? (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Elijah Brooks noted in short that microaggressions are the “daily type things that sort of wear at you over a period of time” (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025). The next section will highlight collective experiences of microaggressions among the participants in this study.

I Wish I Were Black: Microaggressions Based on Race/Ethnicity

Several research participants, particularly those who identified as Black women, shared stories of personally experiencing microaggressions. One participant, Kendra Wallace, shared a story of a microaggression she experienced in the local community of the higher education institution where she was working. She identifies as a Black, Afro-Caribbean American woman, and had this experience in her predominately White city:

I remember going to a community meeting and my hair was out, and that time I had just gone natural, so it was, like, really curly, and I remember I like, slipped into the back row, and this is, like my community experience. I never... I experienced a little bit of this on campus, but it was really the community experience that was really just like, jarring to

me. I sit in the back row and the woman, like, basically stops, and was like, "Oh my gosh. I wish I were Black so my hair could look like that!" And I was like, there are like, 50 White women in here, like, I'm just here to, like connect with my community. And it just I, that's when I was like [to my spouse], "Listen, we need, like, we need a plan to get out of here because what I while I can manage that happening like for myself, what I don't want is that my kids feel like that." And that was really a critical piece of like, why I was like, we're not, we're not living here. I don't want to be the like, "Oh my gosh, educated Black, like Black people!" and that be like an anomaly for the area we were in, which was everywhere we went. (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025)

Dr. Wallace went on to share how that community experience and others catalyzed her decision to leave the town and university where she was working. This example illustrates how microaggressions can impact the higher education career trajectories of minoritized administrators, even if the person is not experiencing significant microaggressions at their higher education institution.

Participants also shared stories of microaggressions based on their race/ethnicity within their higher education institutions. James Carter summarized some experiences of microaggressions he has had in higher education by saying,

You can tell when people either have little patience with you for asking simple questions or inquiring about simple things. And you know it's especially when you're maybe one of the only ones [i.e., a Black person]. Sometimes you internalize that as either something you did wrong, or they just have a lot of maturing to do. (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

One of the participants, Amina Jordan, took experiences of microaggressions in higher education and turned it into motivation for writing a journal article. In a published journal article shared with me, Dr. Jordan reflected on some of her personal experiences of microaggressions in higher education. The article wove personal stories about microaggressions together with reflections on belonging within higher education spaces (A. Jordan, Artifact 1, Journal Article). These stories illustrate the small, seemingly quotidian encounters the research participants experienced that pierce the heart and make it difficult to preserve in an environment where one is made into an “other.”

Pet to Threat: Microaggressions Based on Gender

Some participants also shared stories about experiencing microaggressions based on their gender, specifically the women in the research group. Again, the examples are subtle, and the participants did not immediately recognize it because the actions are not explicitly sexist. Rachel Morgan shared a story of a revelation she eventually had where a colleague was enacting a microaggression on her and how she directly addressed it.

This is real, real small, but once I noticed it, I couldn't unnotice it. We had staff lunches, regular potlucks. Maybe we buy the food, whatever. [A male colleague] would stand next to a woman would be like, "Will you put some of that on my plate?" And would move. And would never... one, would never serve himself, and two, would never ask a guy to do it. And when I finally caught on to it. And I would do it right, like, "Oh yeah, I don't even reach sure, here you go." And now I was like, "No, are your arms broken"? Like, that's my passive aggressiveness back, but things like that. (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025)

Dr. Morgan shared other examples of male colleagues disrespecting her, and, like the example of Amina Jordan above, a primary response is to immediately address it with a sharp quip to disrupt the power dynamic.

In the interview with Danielle Monroe, she reflected on her intersectional identities as being a Black queer Femme, which led to experiencing microaggressions. Dr. Monroe sought to interpret the microaggressions enacted against her as an admission that she has power and is a potential threat. She described this through a process of going from “pet to threat”:

When you first get there, you're like the pet, like everybody loves you. They want to hug on you, and like, you know how you love little animals like your pet, and you're heard, and you feel wonderful, and you feel valued. But then suddenly, if you're too knowledgeable, if you're too centered on other people, like your justice and communal focus, and you're holding accountability, then suddenly you become a threat, and therefore they begin to treat you like a threat, because it's actually, as we talked about earlier in this conversation, your threats is actually your power. And when you become too powerful, you become uncontrollable, and where they can't control you, they then have to push you out. (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025)

She later went on to lament how many of her talented Black women colleagues have left leadership in higher education because of the cumulative effects of microaggressions and being pushed out. She observed that “There is an insane loss of talent and skill, because the system itself doesn't want to change.” (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025)

Getting ‘Willy-Nilly’: Second-hand Microaggressions Through Witness

Research participants also had stories to share of witnessing colleagues receive disparaging or disempowering remarks, which become a form of secondhand microaggressions.

These microaggressions were not pointed directly to the participant, but they become witnesses to how people talk about women and/or people of color when they are not present. As an example, Sophia Henderson told a story about her supervisor who is a Black woman:

So my boss is an interim vice provost, and she's a Black woman, and she is a badass. Like she is awesome to work with. I really, really need her to stay in this job. That said, you know you are a badass Black woman. Not everyone enjoys being around badass Black women. They make you uncomfortable. They challenge ideas. There's certain ways that Black women are supposed to show up, and she doesn't always show up in the way that people want her to. And so she's had a... She's faced a lot of an uphill battle. So when the call for her like position to actually be truly filled came out, she was applying, I wrote a letter of support for her, but I had a lot of people who have a problem with her come to me and say, "I'm gonna, I'm gonna nominate you for this job. I think you'd be better in this position." (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

Dr. Henderson went on to share how she is not qualified for this position, and how angry it makes her that people are uncomfortable with how her supervisor shows up. It is a secondhand form of microaggression where Dr. Henderson is forced to deal with the inability of others to accept a Black woman as a leader.

Daniel Ortiz had a similar story to share about how people would speak differently to him about a former woman supervisor because he is a man:

One of the things I heard often when I took over the interim position was a certain amount of, "Oh, thank God you're here." Oh, okay, that's great. I'm glad one of us thinks so, because I'm freaking out, but I'm glad you think that, whatever. And inevitably, that conversation, either in that moment or a couple of weeks down the road, led to, you

know, before you got here, the budget in this office was a little 'willy nilly.' The leadership in this office was a little 'willy nilly.' And I kept thinking, early on, I'm like, "Oh, the person who was a mentor to me and who advocated for me, it sounds like what I'm hearing, Todd, is, it sounds like people are saying that, that because I didn't work directly under them, they could have done a better job." And when I realized a year later, a few months later, probably more like a year later, if I'm being honest and self-aware, is that those people who had something critical to say about my predecessor never gave her the support she needed to be a better leader, and sometimes the academy says things about people like me and about people like my predecessor. We don't want to offend. We don't want you to misunderstand. We don't want you to comport yourself or lead or manage a budget in a certain way, because we don't want to imply that you can't because of your culture.

In this scenario, the microaggression was a refusal to give Dr. Ortiz's predecessor the support she needed to be successful or have a direct conversation about what the job required. It then evolved into uncomfortable conversations for Dr. Ortiz where he was forced to receive disparaging remarks about a person whom he held in high regard.

To conclude, all participants directly or indirectly experienced microaggressions. Microaggressions have a macro impact by creating environments in higher education where people are not given dignity and respect, and where they are directly or indirectly made to feel excluded. The research participants experienced microaggressions directly either based on their race and/or their gender, or they witnessed microaggressions through secondhand experiences. The first two group experiential themes – *Pressure of the Political Climate* and *Macro Impact of Microaggressions* – are inherently negative in nature. While it may not be ideal to begin with the

negative, it does appropriately and honestly convey the challenging context where these senior administrators are attempting to do the work of promoting equity. The context is not ideal, and these two negative group experiential themes are a backdrop to the courageous work of the research participants, which I describe in the thematic sections that follow.

Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset

The overarching group experiential theme for this study is *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset*. The theme most succinctly captures the experiences of the higher education administrators in this study known for promoting equity and describes the posture that they are applying to their work. In fact, a way to summarize the main takeaway from this entire study is: be a good human and bring that mentality to your work within a system. This section will expand on the participant's idea of being human and the mentality they applied in the act of humanizing higher education systems.

Convening Conversations Around Food

All humans need the sustenance and energy that comes from eating. And gathering around food is a consistent practice throughout the history of humanity. Many of the research participants described convening people around food for the purpose of building connections and mutual understanding across differences. Amina Jordan noticed that staff felt excluded from the center of the community in her college, and so she started a lunch once a month,

Then, when I was [new to my position], I was so concerned about staff that I began giving and paying for lunch once a month for the staff of our college. When I started it, I thought, oh, one person will come. Five people. The staff; they love it! It's been beyond my wildest they love it. I cannot mess with the staff lunch. This is something that they... I never go there. It's their space. I told them on the first day, "This is your space. You come

here. You meet other staff from across the college. Have a great time. You won't see me here. You know you can, you can bad mouth me here all you want, but this is your space to do with what you what you what you desire of" Okay. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Dr. Jordan was surprised at how hungry the staff was for a space where connections could happen. She thought only a few people would attend, but large numbers of the staff attended the lunches. And the lunches do not always have a clear purpose or agenda beyond creating space for people to connect. Creating this space worked so well for the staff, that Dr. Jordan decided to do the same for faculty,

Now, because I was giving lunch to staff once a month, beginning this year in my new position, I'm giving faculty lunch once every month. And when I started the lunch for faculty, I thought, five people might come. Okay, guess what? I have a minimum every month of at least thirty faculty that come to lunch. And what makes me happy about this is the fact that when I, you know, I've never seen faculty from all the units in our college in the same room at the same time. You will see a smattering of faculty from different departments. But for the lunch; [laughs] this is the first time that I see faculty from various academic units in the same room. They come. I have no agenda. They get food, they sit, they chat with one another. I can't tell you how many faculty members in our college have told me, "Oh my god, guess who I met for lunch the other day?" And then they mentioned someone in a different department and someone in a different department. I never knew that was what was going to come of it, but that's what's happened. You see what I'm trying to say? That is give people the tools to take possession of something and make it their own, and they would help you do your job

even better. So like, those are the those are a few examples that I can give you to... you know, to show that, like when you talking about equity, it was for me, it was a no brainer the moment my position included faculty, I was like, "Staff are getting lunch every month. Faculty are going to get lunch every month." And I never expected that as a faculty, we're going to appreciate it that much. And they do. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Dr. Jordan saw the impact that creating space for connection made for the staff. And as someone who thinks proactively about equity, she decided to create a similar space for the faculty.

While Amina Jordan was gathering people around food with no clear purpose beyond connection, other participants had different human purposes for gathering people around food. Early on in her career, Kendra Wallace was working in student affairs. A lot of disruption was taking place on the national scene related to race, and she recognized no one from her university was creating space to talk about what is happening. She proactively sought to create that space,

So I spoke with our [Vice President of Student Affairs] at the time, and I presented this idea of like, "Hey, could we host lunches during the summer?" While all of this is going on to really with just staff from student affairs, for us to be talking about this, because we need to talk about it, we are equipped to have hard conversations, but we haven't figured our own shit out yet, because we are still we are personally impacted by this. And I remember going in there, and I was just like, "Can we do this? Is this okay?" And she was really supportive of it. (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025)

In this example, Kendra Wallace wanted to create space for fellow staff members to connect around hard conversations. Those conversations eventually expanded to include students as well and became a way to release the tension of the political moment and break the cycle of silence.

Rachel Morgan convened people around food for the purpose of learning across different cultures and backgrounds. Her athletic department had several internal committees with the responsibility of ensuring representation from various groups within the athletic department,

But, but each committee, you know, is responsible for the month, whatever that is, and they're student athletes on the committee too, and so they, you know, whether it's having African food at training table one night and educating them on that or we had a women's panel. So, yeah, they do events all year, and I think that's been great, and that's definitely come out of this [strategic planning process]. (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025)

Knowing that people need to eat became an opportunity for Dr. Morgan to create space for her athletes to build relationships and understanding across differences.

Nia Robinson noticed that women at her university did not feel affirmed. Her response was to create a space for connection around food that would be affirming and encouraging,

So it was something happening within the cultural environment where they did not feel as affirmed. So we started right off, created a first year women's breakfast and allowed them to gather and form community, meet other female identified leaders at [our university] and begin to form connections. So as they need those connections, they would be there for them, and they could call them and recall them. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

Nia Robinson was intentional to create a welcoming space for women, and a space where sustaining connections could be made.

Sophia Henderson has the responsibility to build connections between students and faculty. She began a program that incentivized faculty to host meals in their homes for students. She also ran a popular program that incentivized students to ask faculty to lunch,

We run the [Student/Faculty Lunch] Program. Just like, this is really cool. This is also funded by a gift where every undergraduate has access to about 70 bucks a semester, where they can take any faculty out to lunch, and they call it [a fun nickname], and they've turned it into a verb, because they're... Yeah, so, so I'm gonna [fun nickname] this professor or like, the best part about it is that the faculty brag about. "Oh, I'm sorry. I can't go that meeting. I have, I have a [fun nickname]." It works so well, so I'm trying to replicate that program, because the kids love it, the faculty love it. It's easy, low hanging fruit. It's actually not that expensive a program, for the impact it has. (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

Sophia Henderson discovered that empowering students to take faculty members to lunch disrupts power dynamics and creates space for authentic connection that will benefit both her students and faculty.

It would be theoretically possible to do this work without food, and the research participants gave lots of examples of convening people for connection and conversation without food. However, there is something distinctly human about sharing food together, and the idea of food and convening people around food was a strong throughline connecting the interviews.

Dignity, Love, and Courage

The participants in this study consistently demonstrated that they cared about the people – faculty, staff, and students – within their higher education institutions. They sought to create environments and set up systems that give people dignity. At the core of treating people as humans is the idea of dignity. Dignity is recognizing and respecting the humanity of another. The way to demonstrate dignity is by being willing to love another person. And in this current moment in higher education, it takes courage to love others and to give them dignity. Applying

dignity, love, and courage in a higher education setting was beautifully demonstrated by Danielle Monroe:

At the core where I'm sitting right now in my life is around dignity, and I will also add love and courage. And I intentionally add courage because of where we're sitting right now, um, in higher education institutions within a political climate that basically has all higher education institutions under threat, right? Everybody's afraid to lose funding, therefore everyone is folding, and therefore the entire organization folds. And so, what I think about that is we need more courage, right? But courage is also linked to love and dignity. And this comes back to this idea of humanizing, how we humanize higher education, how we humanize people within higher education, how we use humanizing as a pedagogy and a practice within everything that we do. And therefore, that means that we have to have love at the core of it, because when we love people, we tend to humanize them, right? (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025)

She went on to share about the dangers of dehumanizing other people, and the polarized political climate that pushes people to dehumanize other people.

The idea of the need for love in higher education was echoed by James Carter. He spoke about love in the context of the moral obligation of people in higher education:

Our moral obligation as educators in you know, whether that's higher education or not. But our moral obligation is making sure that we are responsibly producing citizens of this world. You know. I know that there are different political languages out there right now, but you know, it's not just America, it's the world that we belong to. And you know. You know, we don't need a wall. We need we need love. (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

James Carter felt a moral obligation to create citizens, and another way of describing the process of creating citizens is treating people with dignity. And for James Carter, the way to live into this moral obligation is love.

As I was conducting the interviews, I quickly noticed a subtle trend of dignity across most of the interviews. I recognized that many of the research participants would casually insert my name, 'Todd', into their responses. As a few examples, when I asked Elijah Brooks about when he started noticing disparities in higher education leadership, part of his response included, "And also Todd, I would mention too, that in 2015 I think I got introduced to the Racial Equity Institute, which is an racial equity organization based in Greensboro, North Carolina" (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025). When I asked Nia Robinson about her definitions of equity and justice in higher education, she replied with "Todd, can we even say them? [Laughs]" (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025). In analyzing the transcripts, six of the nine participants inserted my name multiple times into their responses. Daniel Ortiz was the most prolific and said my name in his responses a total of twenty-three times! Grand total, the participants inserted my name more than fifty times into their interview.

I had not previously met any of the research participants, and our interview was the first time we interacted in real time. By inserting my name, the research participants put me at ease, recognized my humanity, and gave me dignity. The participants treated me like a colleague, even though in the higher education hierarchy, they had tremendously more power and status than myself as a graduate student. Inserting my name into their responses was a micro practice of dignity. Perhaps an antidote to microaggressions is micro practices of dignity.

Listening to Learn

When gathering people around food, the primary activity is not merely eating. It is also conversation and interactions. Key for any conversation and effective communication is the skill of listening. One way to give someone dignity, respect, and love, is to be present and listen. The concept of listening came up in several of the interviews. In the context of higher education, it is important to listen for the purpose of learning. The senior administrators all demonstrated an excellent capacity to listen. They also applied the idea of listening to systems and created intentional feedback loops so that the institution can develop the capacity to listen. Two of the research participants – Danielle Monroe and Daniel Ortiz – have a background in counseling where listening is a core skill they developed. Both discussed how they incorporated the skills of the counseling background into their senior administrative role. Daniel Ortiz reflected the following:

But what I learned, and it took me less than a year, but break things down into years, is by the end of my first year as an Associate Dean, I was so thankful for my counseling degree, because it helped me understand people. It helped me understand the importance of conversations. It helped me understand the importance of listening to learn, not listening to respond, right? And I'd always applied that, either as a clinician in the schools or in a private practice or teaching others how to be clinicians, but I never, I never thought it was scalable or translate or translatable outside of that. So I learned that early on, and I've been really grateful for my... And it's not the... It is the counseling degree, Todd. But for whoever ends up listening or hearing or reading this, it's also just those communication skills have been super important, right? (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

Danielle Monroe leaned into her counseling background of listening when navigating a challenging meeting with people at her institution who were doing DEI work. She recalled this story,

And I went into this meeting, you know, as a recent counseling clinician, and I listened to these people across the room, and they were talking, and I was just like, "Damn, none of these people actually like each other. That's crazy!" These are... because you think that people who are doing DEI work, right, allegedly, and people who were... specifically people who are doing justice and advocacy work and caring for other human beings, that you think at the core they would start to care for themselves and one another first. When I was looking around that room, what I heard and what I saw, I instantly know they actually did not. I was like, "These people actually don't like each other." And it's one thing to not like each other, it's another thing for that dislike to actualize it into an inequity.

She continued and shared how she used her counseling and listening skills to surface inequity and tension that existed in the room. She had to disrupt the flow of the meeting and make it possible for the people in the meeting to listen to one another.

Rachel Morgan also affirmed the importance of listening and communication skills in the work of promoting equity:

Many problems can be solved or diffused if people feel heard. Which means to me, it comes down to communication. And anyone that talks to me will hear me lecture about communication, and even if it's hard communication, or what you thought was bad communication. Most things are not as bad as they seem, or as good as they seem,

whatever, but I think a lot of problems just generate from people feeling unheard and having miscommunication. (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025)

She later went on to emphasize this point by saying that,

People are not good communicators. Yeah, um, I think I do that, and I really try to work with young people on having difficult conversations and being able to express their actual issues, not everybody else's. There's, there's a lot of "Well we all." "Who is we, you know, what is your actual problem? Is this your actual problem? Or, let's... dial it back." And again, it's communication. I don't know how else to say it. (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025)

For several of the research participants, being a good human entails listening and having strong communication skills. Too often people in positions of power do not know how to listen, particularly to the most vulnerable people in their communities. The research participants all demonstrated a willingness to listen to the people in their sphere of influence. And for the research participants, listening was not merely an end of itself, but a means to learn and apply that learning to the work of promoting equity.

The Wisdom of the Pause

The work of promoting equity and humanizing higher education can be draining and difficult. In doing the work, it is important to remember one's own humanity and limitations. Recognizing one's own humanity is a theme that came through strongly in the interview with the research participant who had the most years of higher education leadership experience: Nia Robinson. Sprinkled throughout her interview were moments of reflection on the need to recognize her own humanity. For example, she spoke about the wisdom of the pause,

The importance of the pause means so much more to me now than before. I don't have to be a super heroine. And I certainly don't have to do that as a Black woman expected to say things and not say things that maybe we haven't broken and say things that we're not necessarily fully acknowledged or compensated for. My wisdom now is that I can, I can pause. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

She later told a story that demonstrated how she practices the wisdom of the pause in the wake of the recent national election in the United States,

I can recall, most recently, after the election, and for in a place like [my university], we were very much involved in democracy and concerned about how higher education would be impacted, having looked at Project 2025, and we're seeing a lot of those elements and immediately, within a day or so after the results of the election, one of my co-workers was like, "Well, we need to do something. Nia, what are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm not doing anything right now. I'm going to be just a citizen like everybody else, and try to figure out how to make sense of what has happened." And I was so tickled at myself, because years ago, I would have been like, "Yes, we need to get going...we're going to get on the Zoom, we're going to get everybody here, we're going to talk about what we need to do." And I was like, "I'm going to fall back for a minute, and if you want to do something, go for it, like you are welcome to do this, do that, as well as any other member of our community. But right now, I need to figure out where my grounding and where my centering is." And that probably was some wisdom that was modeled for me, or wisdom that somehow I picked up on eventually. And later on, we were able to do something first, just starting with just holding space. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

She also demonstrated this wisdom by sharing a recent anecdote about needing to prioritize her role as a mother over her role as a senior administrator,

My daughter was having a crisis, and I was like, “I’m going to my daughter’s, taking a laptop, and I’m going to go there, and I can do my work, but I need to be with her.” And that’s a very different place than I probably would have been before. I’m grateful for people that have modeled that. I’m grateful for what I’ve been able to learn along the way. And some of that, quite honestly, has also come from students in this new generation that are saying, “No” and “No” is a complete sentence and that they’re not going to be, you know, additionally harmed in systems that weren’t necessarily designed for us anyway.

(N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

In summary, the research participants demonstrated that part of what it means to humanize higher education is not only to recognize humanity in others, but also humanity within oneself. Nia Robinson showed that it can look like caring for oneself and prioritizing relationships outside of work relationships. The research participants also humanized higher education by making space for people to eat food, being courageous in showing people dignity and love, and listening for the purpose of learning. This happens on an individual and person-to-person basis, and senior administrators known for promoting equity in this study also applied that same mentality to their higher education systems.

Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems

Humanizing higher education is a core philosophy of the research participants and a foundation for their work of promoting equity. In addition, there were many practical ways the research participants humanized higher education through influencing policy, enacting processes, and utilizing strategies. The participants had several areas of convergence in their approach, and

their roles were diverse enough that they approached the work in different ways depending on their context and area of oversight.

Data is the Why: Using Data to Advocate for those who Need Support

The strongest point of convergence among the research participants in their approach to promoting equity is the use of data. Most of the participants spoke about how they collect and analyze data to inform them about the work of promoting equity. For example, Nia Robinson said that she advocates for equity by, “asking a lot of questions, trying to get an understanding, looking at data to see if inequities exist, and then bringing in the individuals that have the power or influence to be able to address the changes, the change that's needed” (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025). She then gave an example of how she used data to influence program changes,

You know, some examples that come to my mind, you know, probably even starting with years and years ago, of looking at retention data for students of color and seeing that there was a pivotal place that we were losing students. They come in seemingly pretty strong, but somewhere, as soon as they hit those gatekeeping courses, they may not be retained at the institution. So I started with Summer Symposium of giving students the opportunity to take a couple classes during the summer, build community, figure out what it's like to live on their own, without their parents or guardians. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

She recognized in the data that certain students had low retention rates, and then used that information to test an intervention, such as a summer opportunity to get acclimated.

Kendra Wallace first became mindful of disparities for people of color in leadership positions through data. She was looking at the race/ethnicity of the students enrolled at her university and then compared that breakdown with the racial/ethnic representation on the Board

of Trustees. She said, “I thought about like, those dinners and those trustee meetings that I saw a bit differently, when I actually started seeing the data [of who was and was not represented].” (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025)

Daniel Ortiz went so far as to define data as the last hope and ultimate purpose of the work that he does in promoting equity,

The [other] thing that I've learned is the importance of data and particularly now that we find ourselves in this current reality, right? I've created a meme that is a piggyback off of Star Wars, when Princess Leia is her little image is inside R2D2, and it says, "ObiWan, you're our last hope." And so now there's one that says, "Data, you're our last hope." That's it, Todd. Like, like, I... Data has become my new why. (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

He went on to expand on data as his “why,” and how he utilizes it in the work that he does, My why is data. The reason why we have programs and policies and practices that elevate inclusion and equity and belonging is because of data, because hundreds of people on our campus just completed a campus climate survey a little less than a year ago, and this percentage of this group, and that percentage of that group and this percentage of this group have told us how they feel about climate and the classroom and their benefits, and whether or not we have enough ramps on campus for wheelchairs and on and on and on. So that that is my new why, and if I know you, and sometimes if I don't know you, I'll tell you about [my wife and kids], but for the most part now, I just tell you about the data. And I didn't, I used it, but I didn't lead with that. Now I lead with that all the time, and that's a lesson that I've been you know, if I'm ever on the road, people always ask me, "Well, you know, what's the number one thing I need to know?"

You need to know the data. You need to sharpen your why. And inevitably, that leads to a conversation around data. (D. Ortiz, Interview 4, March 25, 2025)

Dr. Ortiz uses his personal story to provide motivation like the fact that he is a first-generation college student, but he has grown to rely on the data as the driving force behind pushing forward with the work of promoting equity.

Elijah Brooks provided a sophisticated approach to using data to inform his work. In the strategic plan that he shared with me, data-driven accountability was a primary goal, and the institution committed to evaluating and then sharing data on the progress toward inclusive excellence (E. Brooks, Artifact 2, Strategic Plan). He spoke at length about the importance of disaggregating data to dig into the information to interpret it and identify where the greatest needs reside. He said,

Most people tell you that I am a humble person, but one of the things I'm really proud of here at [my university] is that my colleagues in institutional research that do all the surveys and the studies and so forth and generate data reporting to the federal government so forth. Staff over there said, "Elijah, before you arrived here, we weren't disaggregating data the way that you have challenged us to disaggregate data." And to me, I think that is a major contribution to equity work, because most times when now... Most times analysis that account for race have different outcomes than those that do not account for race. And so if we don't just aggregate, not just on race, but you know, when I receive data, I like to look at it sliced in many different ways, as many different ways as possible, not beyond the big eight social identities, you know, people from this part of the country and people who are family members of the military and so forth, as many different ways as possible. I like to disaggregate the data to see what we might learn at a second, third, fourth level

of examination, and I think that is mightily important to equity work in higher education. And because I hold such a seat around the table, around the VP table, and here I am being a strong advocate for disaggregated data, then that starts to happen in other spaces, because, you know, again, I built up this reputation that we need to disaggregate data. Let's take a look at outcomes at that level, as many different ways as possible. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

Dr. Brooks views disaggregating data provides an important contribution to equity work. He does merely endlessly disaggregate the data; rather, he uses the data for insights on action. He shared this example of this,

I just left a meeting and where I was pitching a concept for this new idea. And part of this is what informs this idea, is that, according to some of our belonging data and our climate data, certain groups of students, first generation students, students of color, members of the LGBTQI community, students who are registered with disability resources have lower belonging outcomes than those who are not, who are straight, who are White, who are continuing education or who are not registered with Disability Resources. So that, I mean, there are significant differences in the outcomes between the dominant group and the minoritized group in that category. So that informs where we need to go to sort of bring more parity into the space and where resources should go. And so this whole idea that I was pitching was built on equity, not just equality, where everybody gets something. So it's just a matter of where the needs are so that those needs are addressed. And in effect, while those needs of the most marginalized are addressed, we actually create a stronger community because the most marginalized is a little bit less marginalized now, you know. Ideally not marginalized at all. So in effect, the entire

community is better. So it's a win, win situation, as opposed to some zero sum experience. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

For senior administrators in this study known for promoting equity, data illuminate the pathway they walk on behalf of their institution. It informs decisions about how they need to allocate resources and even becomes the motivating factor for doing the work. Data influences policies, processes, and strategies.

Influencing and Implementing Policy

Approximately half of the research participants were in positions where they had influence over institutional policy. Part of their work of promoting equity is influencing and implementing policy. Some of those policies are around hiring and attempting to make the hiring process more anti-racist and anti-sexist. Sophia Henderson was able to influence hiring policy.

She shared that,

In my division, we have an anti-racist hiring protocol so all names and identifiers are stripped of CV's and cover letters for the for the first reading. And again, based on all this evidence, we know that people bring their biases to this, to these things. And it's been really cool to see that work in like real life, that the most interesting candidates come from really diverse backgrounds. And I would say my team reflects that right now and I would love to see other parts of the university adopt that sort of strict anti-racist [approach]. And anti-racist incorporates, you know, anti-patriarchy, anti-homophobic, all of those things. You know, when we bring down racism, we bring down a lot of the other isms. And we're able to, like, get good candidates who bring diverse points of view. (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

The idea of an anti-racist hiring policy was also echoed by Rachel Morgan. In the strategic plan she helped to craft for her area, the following was a primary objective:

Strategic Objective: Improve BIPOC access to all job vacancies and curate a diverse talent pool of job candidates for all openings.

- Analyze job descriptions to eliminate potential barriers to recruiting diverse talent.
- Create a resource document for hiring managers that outlines processes and best practices for DEIB-focused hiring.
- Post all job vacancies in locations that will attract a diverse pool of candidates, including identity-focused professional networking groups. (R. Morgan, Artifact 1, Strategic Plan)

While these policies do not guarantee equity in the process or significant representation as an outcome, they do lead in that direction and normalize the expectation of diversity as excellence, particularly when it comes to offering job opportunities.

Kendra Wallace has influence over the admissions process for students joining the program she oversees. She provided this example of influencing policy:

With regards to admissions, there was a policy that seemed to create an additional barrier for our transfer students. Most of our transfer students come from state Community Colleges. I know who goes to community colleges. I've worked in those areas before and I have seen those students thrive in our program. And when I realized that I was like, hold on a second. So you mean to tell me, if a student has saved money because they were in an early college program in high school, that they have all these credits, we are also promising that you should finish this degree in two years. They have to wait a semester before they apply, before they can get into classes, which pushes them back

three years? That, to me, doesn't make any sense. What can we do about the admissions policy to let them in sooner, and just by asking the question and also bringing it up in spaces where we were asked about what...improvements could be made, we were able to kind of utilize a new policy. I don't even know if it's official or if it had to be official, but the fact is that I asked about it, and now I get early college student applications from now, and when they get here, they don't need a GPA, we can treat them like transfer students, so they get into the program right away. So that's one policy that's like, front of mind that I'm like, really proud that I actually asked the question. Because I was like, "Hold up a second. Like, why is this an issue?" But then also, I think I also aim to be accessible to our students, right, accessible to our students and to be accessible to them.

(K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025)

By getting curious, asking questions, and advocating for vulnerable student populations, Dr. Wallace was able to influence admissions policy in ways that promoted equity.

The anti-racist hiring policy changes and admissions policy are a few examples of how senior administrators known for promoting equity in this study are moving their institutions on a more humane pathway that provides expansive opportunities and access to the benefits of higher education institutions. The research participants also used equitable processes to approach their work, and that is the focus of the next section.

Processes to Maximize Participation and Buy-in

Some of the more experienced senior administrators developed processes to approach their work of promoting equity. A process is a set of steps that have principles undergirding them. It creates a predictable rhythm, yet the process does not necessarily need to be rigid and can be adapted to a particular context. Amina Jordan, who had responsibility for supporting

faculty and staff in her college, has a personal process that she follows. That process begins with an identified need. She does not make up work for herself and only wants to address issues that need to be addressed. Once the need has been identified, she involves key people who are affected to get input on a solution and then get their buy-in to implement the solution. Once the solution has been launched, the next step is to get feedback on its effectiveness and then make any necessary adjustments. From there, the organization can build on what it has learned and continue to participate in this process. She provided an in-depth example when a need developed to recognize the work of staff. She created staff awards and had staff leadership involved in every part of the process. The awards now get significant interest and applications, and they are continuing to build on the new process they created. Dr. Jordan sprinkled several other examples throughout the interview of using this equitable process to move her college forward. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Elijah Brooks worked with a team of people at his institution to create a process that different units can follow to develop their DEI plans. The process does not need to be restrictive; rather it gives each area autonomy to follow the process and develop their own way forward. That process is a five-step process of awareness, understanding, skill-building, practice, and then reflection and evaluation. That process is outlined in a communication plan and development guide that his office created and distributed throughout the university. Dr. Brooks talked about this process and used a personal example of his family to demonstrate how to use the process, as well as its flexibility,

So I have a family. I have a wife and two daughters. We all identify as Black. So you might say, "Oh, that's a very homogeneous group." But there's so many ways that we're different. There's so many ways that we're different, for sure, and so with those

differences, I need to one, become aware that those differences exist. Two, take the time to understand the manifestation of those differences and how they play out to the various members of my family. Three, develop some skills that will help me to navigate those differences in a way to be effective and appropriate with my family members. Four, to actually practice them so that we are not just developing the skills, but actually put them into play. And then, five to evaluate and reflect on how well I applied those skills that I gained. And then it goes back to the awareness, the understanding, the skill building, the practice, the reflection and evaluation, on and on. That same type of thing that I try to apply in my family, I think, is important for the work that I do as well, particularly as I'm trying to make more people aware of the differences that exist, have an understanding, providing educational opportunities for them to understand the development of those differences and how the people with those differences experience the world. Then from there, developing some skills for how they may navigate, whether that's difficult dialogs, whether that's how to affirm someone's experiences, how to summarize after someone has spoken, how to not take up space, and how to read certain cues, cultural cues, and then practice those things, you know, to actually do this. You know, it's important to not just develop these skills, but actually put them into play. And so, create opportunities for the people that I work with to actually not just learn these things right here, but situate them in ways that forces them or maybe inspires them, I would like to ideally, say, inspire them to practice what they've learned and then reflect on that. You know, sometimes we get so busy that we don't take time to reflect on how well we executed a certain task, and that's important, to feed us continuously. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

Dr. Brooks later went on to underscore the importance of getting buy-in for this work as a part of the process and avoiding making it forced or required. For the equity work he promotes, he smartly ties it to institutional history and priorities. He will routinely tie his work to the university's mission statement to "foster respect for human differences" and the stated intention of the university founders in the late 1800's to "build a college for the world" (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025). Therefore, one way Elijah Brooks promotes equity is to align it with institutional priorities. He demonstrated that communicating how the work aligns with institutional priorities can create pathways to navigate power dynamics and can be a way to overcome resistance to the work.

The work of promoting equity can be confusing and overwhelming. Following a process provides a starting point and a way forward. This section highlighted two different approaches senior administrators can take with a process. One is an individual approach to the work that a senior administrator can draw others into. The other is a systemic approach that any area of higher education can follow. Both approaches had an iterative nature and a commitment to continual improvement. The final sub-theme theme will showcase various strategies the research participants utilized to promote equity.

Strategies to Support Full Participation

Given the diversity of positions and institutions, the research participants did not have a unified strategy or approach to promoting ways to obtain full participation from everyone in their community. Instead, they used a variety of strategies and approaches that were customized to their immediate context. Most of them occupy new or realigned positions, and that newness creates an environment where strategic innovation is necessary. What follows is a general

overview to demonstrate the variety of strategies and the areas of convergence and divergence among the research participants.

Strategic Plans

Perhaps the most traditional and well-established approach to strategy for promoting equity is crafting a strategic plan. Two of the participants – Rachel Morgan and Elijah Brooks – discussed their strategic plans at length as a part of the interview. Both also submitted a copy of their strategic plan as a document to be analyzed for this study. Both were primary authors for their strategic plan, and both were quick to name that the effort to create the document engaged the team. To both, the idea of being an isolated author of the strategic plan is non-sensical.

The strategic plan from Rachel Morgan is twenty-one pages and is labeled as a ‘Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Strategic Plan.’ It begins with a commitment “to cultivating and promoting a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment” (R. Morgan, Artifact 1, Strategic Plan). The plan has three primary goals: “strengthen diversity, expand diversity through hiring, retention, and education, and strengthen a sense of belonging” (R. Morgan, Artifact 1, Strategic Plan). Each of the three goals has three to five objectives to meet the goal. The language is general, and missing is clear benchmarks to define success.

The strategic plan from Elijah Brooks is eighteen pages long and is labeled as a ‘Communication Plan & Development Guide.’ It begins with a mission and vision for the work, followed by an overview of the people and areas involved in the work. The next few pages outline the “Hub & Spoke” model that illustrate the way various areas of the university relate to Dr. Brooks’ office (E. Brooks, Artifact 2, Strategic Plan). The next few pages outline a community strategy, as well as some clear definitions around inclusive excellence, diversity, equity, and inclusion (E. Brooks, Artifact 2, Strategic Plan). The final section is the process

mentioned above that different areas of the university can follow to develop their own strategic plans, and the document concludes with a case study to illustrate how one department followed the process (E. Brooks, Artifact 2, Strategic Plan). This strategic plan is a roadmap and provides a shared vernacular for the entire institution to embrace and practice.

Recognition Through Awards

A few participants implemented awards as a strategy to recognize the efforts of people, particularly people whose work can be overlooked or underappreciated. Amina Jordan recognized a disparity where faculty in her area had awards and recognition opportunities, but those same opportunities did not exist for staff. She was intentional about addressing that disparity as soon as she got the opportunity:

It had always been my pet peeve that we cannot be recognizing faculty all the time at the college level and not recognizing staff. So now that faculty and staff became part of my portfolio this academic year, you know, we worked seriously on it, and we came up with staff awards, and I can be more excited about, you know, staff being there on what we call our Awards Day Celebration, where faculty will be celebrated who won awards and staff will be celebrated who've also won awards. So those are the kinds of things, you know. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Similarly, Nia Robinson started a 'Woman's Award' at her institution to "celebrate the contributions of women and what they were doing at [the school], locally, in the state, nationally, as well as internationally" (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025). After Dr. Robinson left that institution, the award was renamed in her honor as she was the first woman of color to hold the position at the institution's Women's Center. (N. Robinson, Artifact 3, News Article). Presenting awards is a strategy to make visible what is often invisible in an institution.

Storytelling

Another strategy is utilizing storytelling methods to amplify the work of being inclusive of everyone. The purpose of storytelling is to shine light on the positive efforts that are taking place and the beauty that exists within the diversity of the community. In a podcast that Nia Robinson shared, she named the need for more storytelling. She thinks highly of her institution and the work that it has been doing to create a community moving toward equity and justice. She felt strongly that the stories of the university are stories that need and deserve to be shared more broadly. (N. Robinson, Artifact 15, Podcast Transcript)

Elijah Brooks echoed the need to have better tools for storytelling. In response to what he would do if he had more time to devote to equity work, he gave this response:

If you actually wave a magic wand, what I could do. I wouldn't say if it's a 100% of the time, but we I would love more to have a publicist effect, all right. So what I mean by publicist effect is I want to be able to tell the story of inclusive excellence at [my university] and how it relates to all people here at the university. Why this is something important, not just to people of color, not just to women, not just members of the LGBTQI community, but all people and how we as a university cannot achieve this mission without inclusive excellence. I would love to be able to frame and have a communication, marketing, publicist team that will help me tell the story of inclusive excellence, and how it is not just a part of, but really infused. It should be infused with everything we do, from our teaching, from our servicing, from whatever aspect that we're doing, and how it can actually make us better individually, regardless of our identities. So I would love to have the opportunity, or have the wish granted, of sort of this publicist effect. You know, just thinking about... There are certain narratives that get out in our

society. I mean, it's been happening from the dawn of time. You know, whoever has the most ink from a from a printing press, whoever has the most visibility, from a marketing or in a social media, a certain narrative gets out there, and people start to fall into that particular narrative, and it can influence ways of people thinking. Well, I would love to have that type of effect on how inclusive excellence is a part of everybody's work, and if I could do that, that will be an indicator that this is personal. It is personalized. And when we can make it personal to oneself, then there's more engagement, there's more readiness, there's more reception to actually learning about the differences that exist. There's more readiness to developing the skills, there's more readiness to practicing those skills and getting better and better and better. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

Dr. Brooks recognized that storytelling and being able to influence the stories that people receive is a growing edge for the work of promoting equity. This same idea was also emphasized by the strategic plan authored by Rachel Morgan. That strategic plan included the following objective,

Strategic Objective: Utilize storytelling methods to highlight DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) within [our athletic department] and its impact among individuals and teams, on campus and in relevant communities.

- Launch an internal email series that highlights coaches, staff and student-athletes and shares non-athletic information about each.
- Revamp marketing and branding materials to showcase cultures and diversity that accurately represent the DEIB-focused vision for [our athletic department].
- Create a public online resource that details [our athletic department's] commitment to DEIB. (R. Morgan, Artifact 1, Strategic Plan)

The research participants knew that stories draw people in and help people to imagine new possibilities. It is a growing edge for strategy in the work of promoting equity and is an area that is ripe for innovation.

In conclusion, the areas of strategic planning, awards to make visible the invisible, and storytelling highlight strategic efforts of senior administrators known for promoting equity. This overview scratches the surface of the various ways in which the research participants are approaching their innovative work. Part of this strategic work's purpose is to create a culture of belonging at the institutional level, which is the focus of the final theme.

Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans

A primary purpose for the work of the research participants in this study is to create a culture of belonging. Creating an environment where everyone belongs will provide access and opportunities to people who have been historically excluded from access and opportunities in higher education. The history of higher education in the United States goes back to 1636, beginning with the founding of Harvard, which only enrolled White men from the wealthy elite. No record exists of a woman earning a college degree prior in the colonial period prior to 1800. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that higher education institutions enrolled women and people of color who had been previously excluded (Thelin, 2019). By virtue of being in PWI's, the research participants are working in environments where the roots of the institution are exclusion for women and people of color.

All the participants had a spirit of doing the work that they do to foster a sense of belonging for everyone who is connected to their area of influence. This group experiential theme will explore the nuances of how these senior administrators work to create belonging that seeks to include all humans within their institution. Their approach includes a mindset of

creating opportunities and access for all, as well as mentoring others in ways that are expansive. Participants also spoke of their own networks of support and belonging, which are critical to developing the capacity and imagination to do this work.

Opportunities and Access for All

Several of the research participants were quick to name that their work is not necessarily focused on women and racially minoritized people. Their role is to support opportunities and access for all. Since marginalized groups have historically been excluded from opportunities, it is common for attention and resources to go in those directions, but not necessarily so. James Carter reflected on this by saying,

You know, and let me be honest with you as well, too. I didn't come into this role, and the work I do has never just been focused on minorities and women. It's been focused on providing opportunities and access for everybody. And I'll be honest with you, I support just as many traditional students as I do non-traditional students. You know, I do a lot of mental health work as well, too, and support and providing resources for those students that have challenges. I don't ask you what your background is, what your family income is, what your race is. I mean, it's not predicated on any of that coming through these doors. It's just students that need help. Same thing with faculty. Same thing with staff as well, too. So, you know, yes, I would love to see more people of color become the norm in these environments where it's not such an oddity or a spectacle or a rarity. (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

In this quote, Dr. Carter shared that he sees his work as trying to benefit everyone. He balances a hope to see more representation alongside an authentic desire to support those who need it the most, regardless of their identity.

Rachel Morgan also bristled against thinking diversity and equity are only about certain people. She said, “Right or wrong, I'm not again, I'm not a believer of like you have to have this many people of that you know to be diverse. Diverse is a lot of things. Equity isn't about men and women all the time” (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025). Dr. Morgan also realizes that not everyone is going to support the work of promoting equity. She tries to focus on influencing those who are capable of being influenced. She further explained this mentality:

I work small. I try to I think... I'm probably more effective that way. And I work in a way where people don't have to understand, they don't have to agree. I don't care if people agree with what when it comes to this stuff, what we're doing, I care that they do it and understand why it's important. You want to roll it. I roll it. I'm fine with that. I can't... I try to spend most of my time here [gestures to a middle section]. These people are never coming [gestures to an end section]. These people are already here [gestures to an opposite end]. If you can get a handful of these people, then you're going to get, you know, more. (R. Morgan, Interview 8, April 11, 2025).

She narrates equity work as a process that must start small and with the people who are open and willing to learn.

Just as assuming the work of equity is only for certain people is problematic, it is equally problematic to assume the responsibility of the work rests with certain individuals. Near the end of the interview, Dr. Carter reflected on this point:

You know, when you tend to put this work on one person, or put it into an office, it then becomes that individual's responsibility. And it's not one person's responsibility, you know, it's all of our responsibilities. And I think that making sure that that's understood, and we provide avenues for everyone to be a part of this, you know. And so it's not just

because, you know, I'm Black, you're White or purple or yellow or orange or pink, or whatever the color is, that that's why you do it. You do it because it's the right thing to do. And the thing is, you know, we operate, all of us operate from a point of privilege, and so if you operate on that point of privilege, how much more is required of you? You know, it's our moral obligation to be here. (J. Carter, Interview 9, May 6, 2025)

Dr. Carter frames this work in terms of a 'moral obligation' and doing the work of creating a sense of belonging is the right thing to do.

Nia Robinson also echoed the sentiment that the work of promoting equity is for everyone. In a podcast interview, she shared how tricky it is to talk about the idea of inclusion where people feel like they belong and are connected. The tricky part, according to Dr. Robinson, is who gets to dictate who belongs and is included. She wants to move her institution towards a culture where people show up with the identities that they have, have what they need to belong and be successful, and then have everyone feel included in the life of the institution (N. Robinson, Artifact 15, Podcast Transcript). For these research participants, creating a culture of belonging is about giving more people power and collectively making space where people can be present with who they are.

Expansive Mentoring

Another way the research participants are leaning into a culture of belonging is to mentor others, and to do it in ways that are expansive. Most of the research participants described a complicated relationship with mentors. Some participants had great experience with mentors, and some had a mix of both good and bad. Several participants named that they did not have mentors who looked like them, as they were often one of the first woman and/or person of color

to navigate their pathway. Overall, the group had a mentality that Kendra Wallace named as “Be the mentor that you hope to have” (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025).

Amina Jordan describes her approach to mentoring as ‘shadow mentoring.’ She explained this concept in this way,

I do a lot of what we call "shadow mentoring." You know, is that kind of mentoring that you mentor, that people don't recognize, they won't mention, and things like that. You mentor because... Look, I've, I've worked my way through academia in America without a mentor, I had to learn everything on my own. That is not an experience that I want other people coming up to, you know, to have. And so I do mentor a lot, but I mentor quietly without making a big deal about it. And again, I would say I "shadow mentor," because that is the, that is the phrase that many Black women and faculty of color would say that we do so much mentoring, and the institutions never really recognize how much mentoring we do, and they just take it for granted that it is our job to mentor. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Here she names that she did not have strong mentors, and she uses that reality as fuel to influence the mentoring work that she does without fanfare or recognition. Dr. Jordan went on to share the expansive way in which she conducts “shadow mentoring”:

I've been in America for 30 years now, and the one thing that I never say no to an African institution is when they ask me to serve as an international external examiner on a thesis or PhD dissertation. I am actually reading a PhD dissertation now of a student from the University of Cape Town, when they reach out to me, that's the one thing that I never say no to because it's like my way of giving back. Those students don't know me, people don't know me, but when they ask for my help for something like that, that's the one thing

that I never say "no" to. So you see, there's that same kind of spirit that I have maintained that I do that for African universities, and I do that here when students of color or faculty of color reach out to me, I'm always available to speak to them. No matter how busy I am, because I understand the stakes. (A. Jordan, Interview 2, March 20, 2025)

Dr. Jordan understands the 'stakes' of not getting the support one needs to gain access to opportunities, and to continue growing and developing. She is quick to provide that support when possible, particularly with people from her home continent.

Sophia Henderson also had experiences where she did not receive the mentoring she sought and decided to offer that support to others in expansive ways. She shared how she was rejected when she sought support:

I went to women that I saw doing work I could imagine myself doing, and asked them, like, "Would you mentor me? Could you help me figure out how to navigate these things?" And on two different occasions, those women said, "No, that, you know, you got to find your own way. It's tough out there. Good luck." I was just like, "Damn! That is not how I thought that was gonna go." So that has made it so anytime anyone comes to me and is like, "Could you?" I'm like, "Yes, absolutely, whatever it is you need. Like, I don't know a lot, but we will figure it out together." (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

Once again, she is an administrator who did not always have strong mentors, and rather than becoming bitter, Sophia Henderson used that as motivation to be better for people in her sphere of influence. She takes seriously the commitment to mentor anyone who needs that support. She shared a story illuminating her expansive approach to mentoring,

And, and I'll say I did have a young man come to me a couple of years ago. He might not even be that young, I don't know. Maybe he's young. But he works... Not in my unit, and

he was like, "You know, I kind of want to, I want to be you when I grow up. So how do I do that?" You know, again, yes, I'll say yes to mentoring people, because people need it. And the tough thing there was I had to tell [this man], like, "You need to be quiet. You take up a lot of space." And that was the mentoring I had to give to him, like, let others speak first, you know, sort of kill a little patriarchy out of him. And he, I'm not taking credit for it, but like, he was really... He was open to that kind of feedback and he was just promoted up and into a much higher position over in the administration building. So I'm really proud of him. But he, yeah, he needed a little like starch taken out of him, a little bit, and I think it served well because he was open to other ideas and, like, he heard more than he spoke, and that made him an appealing partner in a lot of ways, and able to move in that way. So I like it when folks are, like, willing to take your mentorship and run with it. (S. Henderson, Interview 7, April 9, 2025)

Sophia Henderson's commitment to mentoring those who are willing to receive it aligns with the idea of a culture of belonging where opportunities and access are given to everyone. It also connects with the theme of responding to expressed needs. By mentoring in expansive ways, the research participants are working to create a future where women and people of color in leadership positions is considered typical.

'10 Toes Down' Support

Part of the energy that is fueling the research participants to create a culture of belonging is the experience of a strong personal support network. A strong support network helps to sustain them through difficult times, and it also provides imagination for what can be possible in higher education. Kendra Wallace spoke at length about the importance of a support network in her interview:

I just truly believe that, like a lot of people, don't recognize that strength of network that there is, and how like caring and gracious and supportive it is. Black women are really standing, for lack of a better term, 10 toes down when they are like, "Listen, is this really going to serve us and our communities." And this network is really strong, and that is what empowers me to know that like, listen, I can do a lot of things out here in mixed spaces, but I go home. I go home wherever home is, whether or not that's a group chat or that's, you know, a community meeting, I go home to a community of Black women who are going to keep me on my toes, but also are going to be like a fleet of people just supporting me. So and I think that that that in itself, is what can drive me to aspire to be a dean one day. It's because I know I got people backing me up and people I trust and who are going to call me out or call me in if, if I'm out of line, or to be able to process that, and I think it's very much a community feel that drives me, and I would argue that for a lot of Black women in this in this field, when especially in a world that really highlights individual game, we... I think we have the antidote, but ain't nobody want to listen to us. So I guess we're just gonna, you know, go on and watch how things unfold. (K. Wallace, Interview 1, March 17, 2025)

Dr. Wallace sees her network of Black women as both a necessary source of support, and a model for creating a culture of belonging that could be expanded.

Nia Robinson also discussed the importance of a source of support, as well as how that motivates her to be a source of support for others,

Most of my closest friends, outside of people I went to high school with, happen to be people that work in higher ed. I think there is an amazing community of scholars and people that I cannot only mentor, but mentor me as well. I seek as many opportunities to

do that next level of sponsorship. So when I hear about jobs or making connections with people, I'm very good to say, "Hey, check out this person." At the same time I'm writing to them and say, "Hey, I heard about this, and I mentioned your name. So you're probably going to be reached out to, but if it doesn't happen, I want you to reach out to them as well." And just really trying to think about the next people. (N. Robinson, Interview 5, April 7, 2025)

She describes reciprocal relationships where she is both giving and receiving, and that support makes it possible to be expansive in how she thinks about opportunities and access for others.

Elijah Brooks also described a community of support and how that empowers him to do the work that he is doing. Here is how he described that network of support:

Education is mostly populated with people identify as women. When you think about the various forms of genders, and women have definitely been a major part of my work. In fact, I am in a suite right now of all people who identify as women. And so, that's a reality. And historically, we see that women, particularly Black women, have been the real change trailblazers for doing equity work for all identities. And that continues to this day where they're... The work that they do is for a wide range of people. And so I've had people who identify as women, who have been mentors for me, to advocate for changes. And so that's been important. And of course, people of color have been important as well. I got to have a sense of community. Got to ensure that I have a sense of support along the way, where I can both gain and give value. And so, that's been critically important to have those identities of women and people of color. (E. Brooks, Interview 6, April 8, 2025)

Dr. Brooks reinforces the importance of a support network while also acknowledging the work of Black women to do equity work on behalf of all identities. He sees this mentality as critically important to reimagining higher education as a place where all people, including women and people of color, can flourish.

Wrapping up this theme, the research participants are mindfully building a culture of belonging. They are doing this not merely by seeking opportunities and access just for people who hold their identities, but by seeking opportunity and access for all. They are mentoring and developing leadership in expansive ways. They are also drawing strength from a community of support and using that as energy to continue building a generous culture of belonging.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the purpose of this study and the senior administrators who participated in the study, as well as an in-depth description of the nine senior administrators who participated in this study. The data from the study came from nine in-depth interviews with each of the participants, as well as twenty-four artifacts submitted by the research participants. Additionally, this chapter discussed the themes that emerged while using interpretative phenomenological analysis. After an iterative process of data analysis, five group experiential themes emerged. Two of the themes – *Pressure of the Political Climate* and *Macro Impact of Microaggressions* – illustrate the challenging context the research participants are operating within. The foundational and overarching theme of this study is *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset*. The participants in this study were thinking deeply about what it means to be a human and then applying the mentality of being a good human to their work in systems. The participants accomplished this work through a diversity of policies, processes, and strategies, which are captured in the theme *Policies, Processes, and*

Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems. Finally, the research participants sought to create environments where everyone in their institution felt included. The theme *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans* provides a rich description of this aspect for their work. The next chapter will offer a more comprehensive discussion about the findings in relation to the two initial research questions in this study, the methodology, and the theoretical framework utilized to further explore this topic. The next chapter will also include recommendations for policymakers, senior administrators, and faculty, as well as potential topics and areas for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of senior higher education administrators who are known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the systems that perpetuate disparities in higher education leadership. This study aimed to explore the policies, processes, and strategies these senior administrators are utilizing to engage the leadership disparities experienced by women and/or people of color in higher education leadership roles. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, processes, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

To address these questions, I worked with an advisory group comprised of people who are currently serving as senior administrators at PWI higher education institution in North Carolina. I invited them to nominate people who they recognize as senior administrators who are known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the systems that perpetuate disparities in higher education leadership. I interviewed nine research participants who also provided relevant documents as data. I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis as outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022) to analyze the data.

The data analysis yielded five group experiential themes. Two of the themes – *Pressure of the Political Climate* and *Macro Impact of Microaggressions* – describe the challenging context the research participants are operating within. The overarching theme is *Humanizing*

Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset. The primary way the research participants are confronting leadership disparities is to think and act like a good human and then apply that same mindset to the systems where they have influence and power. The specific ways that mindset is applied depends on the context, and those specific approaches are covered in the theme *Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*. Finally, the senior leaders in this study are proactively creating an environment where everyone in the institution belongs, and this is the main idea in the theme of *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans*.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of my data analysis, I shared my initial findings with my advisory group and invited their feedback. Overall, the advisory group strongly resonated with the findings. They did provide feedback to strengthen the framing of the findings. For example, one advisory group member suggested I adjust the language of some themes and subthemes to increase the likelihood of the findings being more evergreen. This chapter will incorporate the feedback of my advisory group into a discussion about the summary of my findings, key takeaways, the implications for theory, methodology, policy, and practice, as well as recommendations for future research. First, it will be important to provide a detailed description of my advisory group.

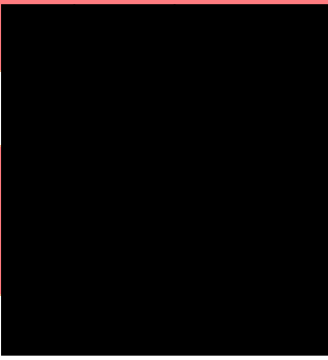
Advisory Group Overview

The advisory group that supported this study is comprised of people who identify with minoritized racial/ethnic and/or gender identities who are serving in senior leadership roles within higher education. Specifically, three of the participants identify as women, and one of them identifies as a man. Two of them identify as Black, and two of them identify as White. All of them work in universities in North Carolina, with two of them at public universities and two

of them at private universities. They all hold significant administrative leadership roles within their higher education institution and hold titles like Vice President and Vice Provost. Table 6 below provides an overview of the advisory group. Due to the current contentious environment surrounding equity work in higher education, I have given all my advisory group members a pseudonym and will de-identify any specific personal details to provide confidentiality for their contributions.

Table 6

Advisory Group Profile Overview

Participant Name*	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Role^	Institution Type
Darius Coleman	Black	Male		Public
Erin Falkner	White	Female		Private
Tessa Monroe	Black	Woman		Public
Kara Whitfield	White	Female		Private

*To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms are used in place of real names.

^To further protect participants' identities, their specific roles will be omitted from publication.

Once I had a complete draft of my findings, I shared it with my advisory group and invited their feedback. Specifically, I asked them to provide feedback on what did and did not resonate in their experiences of high education administration, as well as insights on the implications of the findings for policy, practice, and future research. The advisory group provided valuable feedback in both written and oral formats. Their feedback was instrumental in shaping subsequent drafts of chapter 4 and was heavily influential in shaping this present chapter. The advisory group suggestions for this chapter are interspersed through quotes and

suggestions throughout this chapter. The feedback from the advisory group was also instrumental in shaping the four key takeaways, which are revealed in the next section. As a White man, the advisory group also became a way for me to navigate the research as someone who is not minoritized by race or gender within higher education. Their guidance, input, and wisdom contribute to the trustworthiness of the findings and the key takeaways.

Key Takeaways

This study has at least four important takeaways drawn from thematic analysis. The first key takeaway is the tremendous potential of a humanizing mindset to move higher education forward in doing the work of addressing, dismantling, and reimagining systems that perpetuate disparities in higher education leadership. Second, the present moment requires resilience tactics to do this work. Work is not easy, and significant challenges exist. Senior administrators need to develop and adopt resilience tactics to persist in the work. Due to the complexity and diversity of higher education institutions, a universal approach to policies, processes, and strategies will not work to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. Senior administrators must understand their context and adapt policies, processes, and strategies accordingly. A final takeaway is that to build community, one must first have community. This work cannot be done alone, and if senior administrators are going to do the imaginative work of building a community of belonging within their institution, they will first need to experience community for themselves.

A Humanizing Mindset has Tremendous Potential to Move Higher Education Forward

The central theme of this study illuminates how participants recognized and committed themselves to humanizing higher education. The strength of this theme was echoed by my

advisory group. Darius Coleman had this to share with me: “Positioning humanization as the overarching theme resonates strongly. The emphasis on dignity, love, and courage reflects both an aspirational goal and a practical approach to leadership in hostile or politically charged contexts” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). Applying the mindset of humanization to higher education systems has tremendous potential as a response to the stated problem of this study that women and people of color are not only underrepresented in senior leadership higher education roles; the women and people of color who do occupy senior leadership roles experience significant discrimination and microaggressions. Tessa Monroe echoed this by naming that “humanizing higher education” is unfamiliar language that also feels familiar and relatable, which holds the possibility of new ways of thinking about the ways that higher education needs to develop (T. Monroe, Feedback Follow-up Conversation, August 18, 2025).

In scanning the higher education literature, applying the idea of humanization to higher education contexts is sparse. The first known mention of humanizing higher education goes back to the 1970’s and the work of Terry O’Banion on necessary changes in community colleges (O’Banion, 1971). Most of the recent mentions of humanizing higher education are in reference to pedagogical approaches for faculty (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Kim, et al., 2023; Driessens & Parr, M. 2022). This emerging area of the literature explores how faculty can create spaces of humility and compassion in the classroom where students can bring the wholeness of who they are into the classroom. Many of the journal articles that explore a humanizing pedagogy are a response to the COVID-19 pandemic that drove almost the entire higher education system online (Steward, 2024; Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). Those articles collectively grapple with what it means to humanize students while operating in a disembodied format.

The only reference I could find in reference to humanizing higher education and leadership is a recent article by Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles. The article is an adaptation of her presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education in 2023. In her address, Dr. Gayles defines dehumanization, revealing where it manifests itself in higher education, before providing a model for humanizing higher education as a path forward in uncertain times (Gayles, 2023). According to Gayles (2023), dehumanization is “redefining people who are targets of oppression as less than human” (p. 551) and is found in higher education through the prevalent ideologies of whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, hyper-individualism, and valuing production over people. Gayles (2023) provides a model to humanize higher education that is grounded in humanizing values like “care, empathy, love, responsibility, compassion, respect, and authenticity” (p. 558). Those values align well with the values of love, dignity, and courage that emerged in the experiences of this study’s research participants. Building on the foundation of those humanizing values, Gayles (2023) adds to her model space to heal from trauma, clinging to critical hope, finding solutions to complex problems through solidarity and collective action, and the importance of community.

As a full disclosure, Dr. Gayles is one of my professors in my present doctoral program, and I had engaged with her work on humanizing higher education earlier in the program. I did not have this work in front of mind when crafting the group experiential themes of this study, but it was unquestionably present latently. It was not until after completing the data analysis and returning to the literature to put it in conversation with my findings that I rediscovered Dr. Gayles’ work. I have also been influenced by the scholarship of Dr. Luke Powery, who is the Dean of the Chapel of Duke University. Dean Powery was a crucial conversation partner during my program, and his recent book *Becoming Human* undoubtedly influenced my imagination.

Becoming Human is a theological exploration at the rhetoric of race, and the central idea of the book is the role of the Holy Spirit is to humanize (Powery, 2022). The combined scholarship of Dr. Gayles and Dean Power were a key part of my IPA work and making sense of the data presented by my research participants.

The model or framework of humanizing higher education holds tremendous potential for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining higher education systems that perpetuate leadership disparities. In the current moment of political polarization, the language of humanization can cut through the noise and remind us of our common humanity. Darius Coleman recognized that part of what higher education leaders need to humanize higher education is “concrete leadership practices or training models that operationalize dignity, love, and courage” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). Subsequent sections will build on the need for further research and the development of training models that can unlock the potential of humanizing higher education.

Senior Administrators Need to Develop and Adopt “Resilience Tactics” to Persist in the Work

Higher education administrators currently engaged in the work of promoting equity are facing enormous amounts of pressure and significant challenges. Those experiences are captured in the findings, particularly with respect to the themes regarding the influence of the political climate and the impact of microaggressions. The naming of this reality resonated with the advisory group. Darius Coleman shared that, “The sections on the *Pressures of the Political Climate* and *Words You Cannot Say* capture the chilling effect many of us are feeling” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). However, these pressures and challenges should not lead to despair. At no other point in the history of higher education in the United States have women and people of color had more representation, both in terms of student

enrollment and senior leadership positions (Melidona et. al, 2023; Fuesting, 2023). Much work remains to bring about greater equity and to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems that perpetuate disparities. Rather than despair, the current moment is calling for what Darius Coleman calls “resilience tactics” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). To overcome the volatility of the current political environment, constant leadership turnover, and legislative changes, senior administrators can employ strategies that utilize resilience tactics.

The findings of this study demonstrate some seeds of resilience tactics. For example, some of the participants, specifically Daniel Ortiz and James Carter, pointed to the need for developing language around this work. In a moment where letters like “DEI” and “CRT” are considered problematic and in some cases made to be illegal, finding new ways of communicating becomes imperative. “Humanizing higher education” is one possibility for new language. Another seed of resilience tactics is moving from equity work being concentrated in certain positions and offices to a model where this work is distributed and embedded across higher education institutions. Daniel Ortiz and Elijah Brooks offered a model for this work with their offices providing resources, support, and a process for different areas of their institutions to determine their own pathway for improving opportunities and access. The strategic plan submitted by Elijah Brooks refers to this as the “Hub and Spoke” model (E. Brooks, Artifact 2, Strategic Plan).

Higher education thought leaders are recognizing that the present moment is calling for resilience tactics and are beginning to provide guidance. Dr. Adriana Kezar, who is the Director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, recently published an op-ed article where she acknowledged the political landscape that seeks to dismantle DEI efforts. In the op-ed, she called for rejecting the urge to fight to save existing DEI

efforts. Instead, she recommended listening to the concerns being raised and moving from a siloed approach where DEI program and services are offered on the side to a complete redesign of campuses to support students, faculty and staff from all backgrounds (Kezar, 2025). This redesign institutionalizes inclusion by developing a critical mass of administrators, faculty, and staff who have diversity, equity, and inclusion as a part of their normative practice. Kezar and her colleagues refer to this approach as Shared Equity Leadership (SEL).

SEL is an example of a resilience tactic that creates an environment where responsibility for equity work is shared broadly across campus. In this model, leaders across all functional areas work collaboratively to embed equity throughout their roles and areas. The SEL model of leadership as developed by Harper, Kezar and their colleagues (2025) is defined by three main components:

the **personal journey toward critical consciousness**, in which individuals develop a personal commitment to the work and to continuous learning and growth; **values** that shape how people show up to the work and guide decision-making and action; and **practices** that help leaders operate in new ways that center equity (p. 3).

The SEL model resonates with the findings of this study, specifically the theme of *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset*. For example, the first component of SEL is a personal journey towards critical consciousness. This aligns with the *Listening to Learn* sub-theme where the research participants reflected on their own journeys to higher education leadership and how they are continuing to learn about the need for expanding access and opportunities. The second component of SEL are values including “vulnerability, love and care, comfort with being uncomfortable, transparency, creativity and innovation, courage, self-accountability, and humility” (Harper et al., 2025, p. 4). Those values align with the sub-theme

of *Dignity, Love, and Courage* where the research participants actively reflected on the need for dignity, love, courage in higher education and considered how they can infuse love into their work. The final component of the SEL model is practices that help leaders operate in ways that center equity. The sub-theme of *Convening Conversations Around Food* is an example of the “practices” third component of the SEL model, where the senior leaders created community, expanded opportunities, and created environments for learning across difference around food.

In conclusion, the current moment does not need leaders who will despair. Instead, the present moment is calling for adaptable leaders who can demonstrate resilience tactics. Those resilience tactics can include developing new language to describe the work, as well as advocating and implementing models like the SEL model where this work can be decentralized and embedded deeper into the intuition. Resilience tactics can also look like building a network of support, an insight that will be covered in the fourth takeaway, as well as participating in rhythms of rest and play, as demonstrated by Nia Robinson and the sub-theme *The Wisdom of the Pause*. The particularities of the resilience tactics will depend on the specific context, and understanding and adapting to one’s context is the focus of the next takeaway.

Senior Administrators Who Aspire to Humanize Higher Education Must Understand their Context and Adapt Accordingly

The participants revealed that that there is no unified set of policies, processes, or strategies to advance racial and gender equity. While the participants are all senior administrators at PWI higher education institutions in North Carolina, they all have distinct roles in a variety of different contexts with varying levels of power and influence. Some had influence over admissions processes like Kendra Wallace. Others had more control over hiring processes like Sophia Henderson and Rachel Morgan. Some of them were in positions to influence a university-

wide policy strategy for equity such as Nia Robinson, Daniel Ortiz, and Elijah Brooks. Others had influence over processes to support faculty, students, and staff in their specific department such as Amina Jordan and James Carter. The key takeaway is that context matters for policies, processes, and strategies.

It would be remarkably challenging to create a guide to policies, processes, and strategies that would be applicable in all higher education contexts. However, some scholars are beginning to develop resources to provide clearer guidance for senior higher education administrators. Perhaps the best example of these resources is a 2020 book by Estela Bensimon, Tia McNair, and Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux titled *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk*. The book emphasizes that achieving equity in higher education requires a clear purpose and sustained purposeful action. It helps to translate a theoretical understanding of equity into expansive action that cultivates equity-mindedness (Bensimon et al., 2020). Like the resilience tactic of SEL, the book advocates for making equity a campus-wide effort and argues that this work cannot be done in isolation.

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk encourages senior leaders to reject common pitfalls such as claiming not to see race, avoiding discussions of race, and substituting talk about race with talk about poverty (Bensimon et al., 2020). The strongest point of overlap between the book and the findings of this study are in the call for disaggregating data. The practice of disaggregating data to look at outcomes from different lenses, including race, was a key finding and particularly showed up in the experiences of Elijah Brooks. Similarly, the book advocates disaggregating data by race and ethnicity to make inequities visible and using this data for equity-minded sensemaking, which shifts the focus from perceived student deficits to examining how institutional practices contribute to unequal outcomes. A final insight of the book is the importance of institutional alignment on equity work. The book names that successful equity

initiatives are dependent on visible leadership support, clear communication of goals, and making a commitment to reallocate resources to align equity efforts with broader strategic priorities for sustainable institutional change (Bensimon et al., 2020). One gap in the book is that it does not provide clear guidance on how to overcome indifference or even resistance to equity initiatives at the highest levels of leadership. This points to the importance of meeting higher education institutions where they are and that context matters for the appropriate application of policies, processes, and strategies.

To Build Community One Must First Have Community

The final key takeaway from this study is that to build a sense of belonging and community in higher education, senior administrators must have and experience their own sense of community. My advisory group member Dr. Tessa Monroe reiterated the theme that surfaced among participants regarding the significance of a culture of belonging. A key part of an administrator's role in promoting equity is to foster an environment where everyone feels like they belong. For senior administrators doing the work of promoting equity on their campuses, it is important for them to have a sense of belonging to support networks, both personal and professional, inside and outside of their institution. As Tessa Monroe shared, "administrators cannot create a sense of belonging for others if they haven't experienced it themselves" and then went on to recommend that if they do not already have them in place, administrators seeking to promote equity must "first build their own support communities" (T. Monroe, Feedback Follow-up Conversation, August 18, 2025).

This insight aligns with the sub-theme, *10 Toes Down' Support*, in which participants provided examples of how senior administrators are leaning on their own support networks. Likewise, participants revealed the ways that some of the senior administrators are working to

create opportunities and access for everyone in their area of influence and working to build a culture of belonging within their area of influence.

In reviewing academic literature, most of the research on belonging in higher education focuses on the student experience. A sense of belonging is especially important for students, as it has a profound impact on student learning, personal development, academic success, and overall well-being (Allen et al., 2024; Taff & Clifton, 2022; Mahoney et al., 2022). Taking a long view, creating a culture of belonging for higher education students will eventually have an impact on senior leadership. Research has shown that students who have a strong sense of belonging have higher retention and graduation rates (Allen et al., 2024).

If a broader representation of people believe they belong within higher education, they will be more likely to pursue careers in higher education and will create the possibility of having a broader representation of senior administrators. Current senior administrators have a responsibility to create community where all people, particularly women and people of color, belong. However, for that to be possible, senior administrators must experience belonging and community because one cannot give what one does not have.

In conclusion, these four takeaways contribute to the growing field of scholarship focused on critical advocacy within higher education. Humanizing higher education has the potential to be a critical advocacy framework that responds to the call to action for a future of higher education that is more equitable and just (Pasque & Carducci, 2015). The study is also aligned with the emerging field of scholarship that is centering the voices of senior higher education leaders and is a response to the call for more research on how leaders can effectively practice anti-racist and anti-sexist leadership (Tevis & Foste, 2022). Senior administrators who focus on policies, processes, and strategies that humanize higher education systems will be

practicing anti-sexist and anti-racist leadership. This study moves the field of scholarship centering the voices of senior higher education leaders forward by focusing on the practical aspects of administrative leadership, which can provide insights for individuals and institutions. The implications of this study for theory and practice will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Theoretical and Framework Implications

Two theories and one framework guided this study: LMX, intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's (2020) equity and justice framework. The findings of the study have implications for all three. To begin, the study demonstrated the need to apply a critical lens to LMX Theory. Research participants described experiences of being in the 'in-group' and the 'out-group' in their stages of professional development toward higher education leadership. The research participants demonstrated a collective desire to expand the idea of the 'in-group' to include the full diversity represented within their communities. This alignment with LMX Theory is most clearly seen in the group experiential theme of *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans* and the subsequent sub-theme of *Expansive Mentoring*. It was demonstrated in the stories shared by Amina Jordan who has a practice to offer mentoring whenever reasonable to international students, and by Sophia Henderson's practice of always saying yes to mentoring request, even if it comes from someone with a different race/ethnicity and/or gender.

One way for LMX Theory to continue its academic development would be through additional studies that intentionally blend LMX together with critical theories. By applying a critical lens, LMX Theory can become a tool that can illuminate leadership disparities by exposing power dynamics, inequities and unintended consequences. If senior leaders apply the critical lenses of gender and race to the 'in-group' and 'out-group' members, they can more clearly see who may be missing from the 'in-group.' Applying critical theory to LMX can reveal

favoritism and unequal opportunities provided to members of the ‘in-group,’ as well as the marginalization and alienation of the ‘out-group.’ Applying critical theory to LMX Theory in an institutional context can also reveal how systems and organizational history work to maintain hierarchal and unequal opportunities within an organization. Critical theories create the possibility that LMX Theory can become a tool of liberation.

This study is also grounded in Intersectionality, a concept rooted in Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory that is used to address the unique experiences of Black women facing multiple forms of discrimination based on race and gender (Crenshaw, 2013; Roth, 2017; Tordoff, 2023). The findings of this study reinforce the key tenets of intersectionality, including the recognition that categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are not independent but rather interdependent and mutually constitutive (Burger et al., 2021; Grzanka et al., 2020; Hopkins, 2017). This tenet was demonstrated most clearly in the group experiential theme of *Macro Impact of Microaggressions* and the stories shared by Kendra Wallace, Danielle Monroe, and Amina Jordan of their experiences of being made to feel as an outsider due to their race and gender in their professional and local contexts.

This study also supports the tenet of Intersectionality to advocate for scholars and practitioners to engage in activism that addresses structural inequalities (Gueta, 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Moradi et al., 2020). This tenet was demonstrated most clearly in the group experiential theme of *Policies, Processes, and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*. For example, Sophia Henderson and Rachel Morgan were proactive in implementing anti-racist policies in the hiring processes in their areas of influence. Danielle Monroe also provides a compelling test case of a practitioner who proactively uses a critical lens to approach her administrative work. She describes how she integrates Black Feminist Thought into her work

and describes herself and approach to work as a “Black feminist world builder” (D. Monroe, Interview 3, March 24, 2025).

Perhaps the most significant implications of this study are for Kezar and Posselt’s (2020) equity and justice framework. This study is one of the only known studies to apply the framework in a research endeavor. Overall, the framework did connect with the experiences of the participants in this research study. Table 7 below provides an overview of the seven components of the framework and examples of evidence where that component shows up in the data. Each component of Kezar and Posselt’s (2020) framework did have evidence in the data provided from at least one of the participants. By combining the participants into a collective whole, one can find evidence of the entire framework.

Table 7

Kezar/Posselt (2020) Framework & Evidence in Data

7 Components of Kezar/Posselt Framework	Evidence of Components in Participant Data
Clear definitions of equity and justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions shared in <i>Words You Cannot Say</i> section • Terms defined in strategic plan artifacts submitted by Rachel Morgan & Elijah Brooks
Mindful administrative practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nia Robinson & the <i>Wisdom of the Pause</i>
Wisdom in judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Processes to Maximize Participation & Buy-in</i> featuring Amina Jordan & Elijah Brooks
Critical consciousness about power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-racist hiring policies featuring Sophia Henderson & Rachel Morgan • Elijah Brooks convening campus conversations
Knowledge of self and positionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All participants demonstrated this component in reflecting on their pathway to higher education leadership
Student centeredness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James Carter supporting low-income grad students • Sophia Henderson supporting first-generation college students • Amina Jordan mentoring international students

Routinizing mindfulness and wisdom

- Nia Robinson & the *Wisdom of the Pause*
- *Processes to Maximize Participation & Buy-in* featuring Amina Jordan & Elijah Brooks

A challenge of Kezar and Posselt's (2020) framework is that it is not clear how to practically apply the framework. The framework also seems to have some redundancy, particularly between the components of 'Mindful administrative practice,' 'Wisdom in Judgment,' and 'Routinizing mindfulness and wisdom.' Those three components could be combined into two and perhaps one component. The findings of my study also reveal gaps in the framework and could provide suggestions for additional components. For example, the framework does not acknowledge the pressure that senior administrators who wish to use their role to promote equity experience from contentious political environments and the combined impact of microaggressions. An additional component to this framework could be to emphasize the need for building a support network to help overcome political pressures and experiences of microaggressions. The framework also does not highlight the importance of data, the practice of disaggregating data, and the need for institutional research. The framework would also benefit from adding guidance about communication and storytelling to help promote and spread the work of creating equitable environments.

This present study is likely the first to combine LMX Theory, intersectionality, and Kezar and Posselt's (2020) study. The three working in concert empowered this study to have both a critical and practical approach to the highest levels of leadership in higher education. This unique theoretical integration provides an example of how to blend theory with practice in ways that create the possibility of liberation for institutions with a history of exclusion. It also provided language and imagination for transforming higher education into a place where humans can flourish. It also yielded practical suggestions for senior leaders in higher education. The next

section will discuss the methodological implications followed by suggestions with implications of this study on policy and practice.

Methodological Implications

My research method for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allowed me to learn about the experiences of senior higher education administrators known for promoting equity, as well as gain insights into why and how they do the work that they do. It allowed me to respond to a call for more research on how leaders can effectively practice anti-racist and anti-sexist leadership (Tevis & Foste, 2022). It also allowed me to participate in a central tenet of intersectionality to analyze how different forms of oppression intersect and manifest in specific contexts, influencing individual's experiences (Wright & Chan, 2022; Kanagasingam et al., 2022; Brinkman & Donohue, 2020).

At the heart of my research design is the advisory group. The act of incorporating an advisory group offers significant methodological implications. Researchers are beginning to recognize the benefits of using an advisory board to provide expertise that will guide the research project (Sayre, 2023). In my case, the advisory group model added additional layers of accountability and interpretation to this study. An incredible benefit of the advisory group was their role in recommending research participants. Some research projects stall due to a lack of participants. I did not struggle to identify research participants, and they were more receptive to my invitation to participate in the study given the honor of being recommended by a peer. The advisory group read the first draft of my findings, and they helped validate my findings and added a layer of trustworthiness. They also provided meaningful contributions and insights that helped to shape subsequent drafts of chapter four, as well as the shape and direction of this final chapter. Finally, my advisory group provided a source of encouragement and support. I had a

difficult work transition during the writing of this dissertation, and every member of my advisory group provided me with some level of support that ranged from encouraging words to sitting with me to help understand my options in moving forward.

My experiences with the advisory group align with a few of the group experiential themes. Each member of the group treated me like a fellow colleague in research, and all demonstrated love, dignity, and courage in our interactions that are consistent with the *Humanizing Higher Education by Applying a Human-Centered Mindset* theme. Consistent with *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans*, we also created a temporary community where we provided mutual support. The advisory group members shared with me that participating in the research was energizing and an exercise in hope. In my case, I was able to complete this study and not feel alone. Academic research and completing a doctoral dissertation can be isolating work. Regular check-ins with my advisory group, dissertation committee, and peer students disrupted the monotony of isolation and I believe this study was done in community. In my conversation with Tessa Monroe, she commented that a lot of research reflects a “a Eurocentric, individualistic approach” whereas this approach is moving towards “a collaborative research methodology with a non-Eurocentric perspective” (T. Monroe, Feedback Follow-up Conversation, August 18, 2025). Overall, I found incorporating an advisory group into my research methodology to be edifying and life-giving. I would recommend considering it for other doctoral students and researchers engaging in similar studies.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings from this study, significant changes are needed within the higher education ecology. The experiences of several research participants, as outlined with the theme *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*, confirms studies showing that women and people of color

are experiencing discrimination and additional layers of challenge while serving in leadership roles (Kincade, 2023; Gonzalez, 2024; Sparkman, 2021; Townsend, 2021). Much work needs to be done to actualize a reimagining of higher education as a place where a robust representation of women and people of color are flourishing in senior leadership roles. What follows are some suggestions and recommendations grounded in the findings of this study. The implications for policy and practice are customized for policymakers, higher education administrators, and faculty.

Policymakers

It is difficult to make recommendations for policymakers given the current political climate. As summarized with the *Pressure of the Political Climate* theme, a few years ago in the wake of George Floyd's murder, policymakers were rushing to craft anti-racist and anti-sexist policies. However, that season was short-lived and the pendulum has shifted the other way. In the current moment, state and federal higher education policy is pointedly anti-DEI and policy makers are passing legislation that is casting DEI efforts as discriminatory and illegal (Gretzinger & Hartman, 2025; Alonso, 2025). Higher education institutions are responding by muting DEI efforts and cutting DEI specific jobs.

In speaking with my advisory group about the phenomenon of how severely policy is impacted by shifting political winds, one of my members, Tessa Monroe, said the current situation reminded her of the Garbage Can Model (T. Monroe, Feedback Follow-up Conversation, August 18, 2025). The Garbage Can Model describes how policy decisions are made. Rarely is policy made on a logical basis with robust feedback loops. Rather, most policy decisions are made by "inconsistent and ill-defined preferences" and a process that can best be described as "organized anarchy" (Einsiedel, 1983, p. 54). Simply put, policy decisions are made

based on the whims and interests of who happens to be in power and not on the best interests of the whole. In the present moment, any policy implications emerging from the findings of this study would no doubt end up in the garbage can of policymakers.

To avoid cynicism, the biggest implication from these findings is a call for policymakers to understand the humans impacted by their policies. A desperate need exists to humanize the policies that impact higher education. I encourage and challenge all policymakers who can influence higher education policy by listening to the stories and seeking to understand the experiences of the people impacted by the policies, particularly the most vulnerable. Policies become a tool of oppression when they are weaponized to protect the power of the few against the interests of the whole. Policies become a tool of liberation when they empower people and create opportunities for all people to flourish.

While the current climate is hostile to DEI, policy windows shift over time. Policymakers who resist the temptation to politicize higher education and instead prioritize student success and leadership diversity will position institutions for long-term strength. Building on the findings of this study, policymakers can take concrete steps to move from abstract commitments to meaningful change. In an ideal world, this could include funding leadership pipelines that prepare women and people of color for senior roles, requiring equity audits of hiring and promotion practices, and ensuring transparency in compensation. Policymakers could also establish advisory councils that center the voices of underrepresented leaders, integrating their lived experiences into the policy process. To properly incentivize this action, policymakers can connect institutional funding to demonstrated progress in creating inclusive environments, which would help ensure that belonging is not reduced to rhetoric but embedded in practice. Implementing these measures would not only humanize policy but also strengthen higher

education by ensuring that leadership more fully reflects the diversity of the students it serves. Given the current moment, such policies may be unrealistic but should be a part of the collective imagination for when opportunities arise for creating and implementing policies focused on human flourishing in higher education.

Administrators

The findings present significant implications for higher education administrators, specifically those who wish to be known for promoting equity and working to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in leadership. First, administrators should humanize higher education by treating everyone with dignity and love and having the courage to apply that same mentality to the systems they impact. Being human also means knowing and understanding your story and bringing your full self into higher education spaces. Humanizing higher education looks like creating space for others to share their stories and to bring their full selves into higher education spaces. Finally, being human also looks like participating in rhythms of purposeful work and rest and knowing when to lean into the wisdom of the pause.

Second, higher education administrators should work to create a culture of belonging. The starting point for doing this work is to first experience community and receive support from communities inside and outside of higher education institutions. By experiencing community, administrators will be empowered to create a culture of belonging. A culture of belonging seeks to create opportunities and access for all faculty, staff, and students. A culture of belonging can also look like mentoring others in an expansive direction. LMX Theory can help with this implication. Administrators should routinely and concretely consider who is a part of their 'in-

group’ and determine if that ‘in-group’ has adequate representation of marginalized people within their institution or community.

Another implication from the findings of this study is that administrators must become fluent in the language of data. The data that is generated from research about key institutional outcomes can illuminate the path forward for doing this work. Data can come from formal institutional research, and it can also come informally through intentional efforts to create feedback loops that inform decisions. Administrations need to think like researchers and follow their curiosity. Administrators must master the skill of disaggregating data from a multiplicity of perspectives to determine what groups of people are in most need of resources, support, and potential interventions. Becoming fluent in data might require additional training, or it could look like developing meaningful relationships with people who conduct institutional research or colleagues who have a solid grasp on interpreting data. Furthermore, the present moment may make disaggregating data over filters like race and gender difficult or impossible. In those situations, senior administrators should focus on seeking high response rates and disaggregating for outcomes commonly found on campus climate surveys.

The findings also invite administrators to think and act through processes. Meaningful change and organizational development rarely happen instantaneously. Instead, meaningful change happens over time through iterative processes. The right processes will depend on the context, but a general process to follow begins with listening. That listening can take various forms including convening formal or informal focus groups, surveys, or interpreting institutional data. Once challenges or disparities are identified, seek potential solutions together with the people most impacted. Be sure to align any solution with institutional priorities or values. After implementing solutions, seek feedback on their effectiveness, and use that feedback

to influence future versions of the solution. A process such as this one creates feedback loops and has the power to change institutions over time.

A final implication from the findings is to learn best practices as it relates to policies, processes, and strategies. The specifics will always be dependent on the context, but a growing body of resources is becoming available to help guide the way. Administrators should pay attention to the research and resources coming from sources such as the American Council on Education (<https://www.acenet.edu>), as well as the Pullias Center for Higher Education (<https://pullias.usc.edu/>) and the Race and Equity Center (<https://race.usc.edu/>) located within the University of Southern California. The Shared Equity Leadership model (<https://pullias.usc.edu/project/shared-equity-leadership/>) is an example of a way forward where leadership teams across a higher education campus can take collective responsibility for the work of promoting equity. A recently published book, *The Caring University* by Kevin McClure, focuses on higher education as a place to work. The book describes six organizational changes to create a university dedicated to creating working conditions and cultures in which all employees can flourish (McClure, 2025). Being a part of higher education means a deep commitment to continual learning, and opportunities to learn in this area are quickly proliferating.

Faculty

The results of the findings also have practical implications for faculty. First, faculty who recognize disparities in higher education should consider seeking administrative roles. Higher education has a need for more administrators who recognize disparities and will use the power and influence of their position to address, dismantle, and reimagine the systems within higher education that perpetuate those disparities. Within the classroom, faculty members should focus on humanizing their students and creating a culture of belonging. Higher education in the United

States has never had a stronger diversity of students enrolled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Students who are seen and heard in the classroom, who experience belonging in an academic setting, will be more likely to continue in higher education and create the possibility of greater representation for the future in senior leadership roles. Finally, faculty can also contribute by participating in higher education research. The next section will provide recommendations for future research needs considering the findings from this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research based on this study can take a few different directions. First, similar studies within different contexts are a pressing need. As one of the first studies exploring the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity, this study was limited to PWI's in North Carolina. It would be a benefit to expand to PWI's in other geographic regions to determine if the themes are consistent across geographic regions, or if they are context-specific to administrators in North Carolina. It would also be ideal to have comparative studies in other institutional types. For example, similar studies could be replicated in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Minority Serving Institutions, and Community College contexts. In addition to qualitative studies, it would also be beneficial to have quantitative or mixed method studies that provide additional data and insights on effective policies, processes, and strategies higher education administrators are employing.

In addition to more research on the experiences of senior administrators, research is needed for the cultivation of the available resources. For example, senior administrators need more resources like the previously mentioned *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk* (Bensimon et al., 2020). That book was written in a time when the political climate was more favorable, and the authors wrote the book under the assumption that equity work is welcomed. Future resources

need to include guidance for how to navigate contexts where equity work is either controversial or even considered illegal. Those resources could also include strategies for moving from a concentrated model of leadership to a shared leadership model. They could also include new language for describing equity work.

Humanizing higher education as a framework holds promise for new language and ways of understanding equity work. It should be the focus of future research. For example, Darius Coleman resonated strongly with humanizing higher education as an “aspirational goal and a practical approach to leadership in hostile or politically charged contexts” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). He also pointed out the need to “outline concrete leadership practices or training models that operationalize dignity, love, and courage” (D. Coleman, Feedback Document, August 13, 2025). Future research efforts could develop and test these models and provide language and guidance to take potentially abstract concepts like dignity, love and courage and translate them into action with higher education contexts.

Finally, future research could focus on developing the concept of belonging within higher education. Significant research has been done focusing on students’ experience of belonging within the classroom context (Allen et al., 2024; Taff & Clifton, 2022; Mahoney et al., 2022). The core elements of that research need to be expanded to move belonging from a classroom setting to the institutional setting. The research also needs to include all members of higher education, including faculty, staff, students, and their surrounding communities. These recommendations are a starting point, as tremendous possibilities exist for expanding the research portfolio on promoting equity within higher education.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining higher education systems that perpetuate disparities in leadership for women and people of color. Through their stories and artifacts, participants revealed findings in the form of five group experiential themes. First, the higher education administrators in this study who are seeking to advocate for equity are facing enormous political pressures, as well as enduring the challenges of microaggressions that have a compounding impact over time. A primary way senior administrators in this study are approaching the work of promoting equity is by humanizing higher education by applying a human-centered mindset to higher education systems. Specifically, they are implementing policies, processes, and strategies that move their institutions towards creating opportunities and access for all members of their community. They are creating a culture of belonging defined by treating all people with love, dignity, and courage.

The advisory group's validation of these themes further underscores their resonance with broader experiences across the field, demonstrating that while the obstacles are deeply entrenched, the opportunities for transformation are equally real. This study highlights how structural inequities are not abstract problems, but realities that shape leadership trajectories in profound ways. At the same time, the stories of resilience and advocacy shared by participants offer powerful reminders that leadership rooted in authenticity, community, and equity has the potential to reshape institutions.

In conclusion, this study contributes to both scholarship and practice by offering insight into how institutions might dismantle persistent inequities and create leadership pathways that are more inclusive and representative. Policymakers, administrators, and faculty all have a key

role to play in advancing equity in leadership. This type of work requires intentional reforms to systems, relational support, and systemic accountability. By centering the voices of those who have navigated these challenges, this study affirms that higher education leadership can and must be reimagined for a more just future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Participant Pseudonym:

Date/Time of interview:

Place:

Research Questions:

What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

What policies, practices, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

Consent/Research Statement

I am interviewing you for my dissertation research on the experiences of senior higher education administrators who are known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. For this conversation, I am hoping to capture the experiences of being a senior administrator in higher education. Specifically, I am curious to learn about your pathway to leadership in higher education, where you have witnessed inequities and disparities in higher education, and how you are using your role to address, dismantle, and reimagine higher education systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities. I am also curious if you have utilized any specific policies, practices, or strategies to confront the disparities you have encountered. I am recording this conversation for research purposes. Do I have your consent to record this conversation?

Opening Question

What is your current role and what are the dimensions of your work in that role?

Contextualization

Please share with me your pathway to the position you currently occupy.

- What were the important milestones along the way? What stories illustrate those milestones?
- What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome them?
- Who were the people who were most influential on your journey?
- What role, if any, have women and/or people of color played in your career trajectory?

Apprehending the Phenomenon

Tell me about how your experiences led you to being aware of the inequities and disparities in higher education.

- How did you become mindful of disparities and inequities for women and people of color in leadership positions?

- Can you share with me any stories when you witnessed a colleague experiencing discrimination?
- What wisdom has your experiences in this area cultivated? Meaning, what have you learned about your experiences of witnessing disparities and discrimination, and how does that learning inform your practices now? What experiences helped shape your imagination?

Deepening the Phenomenon

Tell me about your experiences of leading change within your area of responsibility.

- How do you define equity and justice in the context of higher education?
- How have you advocated for equity and justice in higher education leadership? What stories best illuminate your advocacy work?
- What have been your experiences navigating power dynamics to advocate for equity and justice in higher education?
- In what ways are you intentional about developing people (i.e. students and colleagues) for leadership positions? In what ways are you intentional about developing women and/or people of color for leadership positions in higher education?
- What policies, processes, or strategies have you implemented to address those disparities? What are the background stories on the need for them?
- If your work was entirely focused on addressing inequity, what might your day to day look like?
- Any other insights, stories, or thoughts that we have not covered in this interview?

Upon completing the interview, remember to thank the interviewee for sharing their information and remind them that the data collected will remain confidential and seek permission for the possibility of a follow-up interview or request for additional information.

Appendix B

Informed Consent (Completed Electronically via Qualtrics)

Start of Block: Study Overview

Q1 Thank you for your interest in my research study, "Confronting the Systems that Perpetuate Disparities and Inequities Experienced by Minoritized Administrators within Higher Education." This study will examine the experiences of senior higher education administrators who are known by their peers for addressing, dismantling, and re-imagining the institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gendered and racialized disparities and inequities. The purpose of this study is to provide guidance for senior administrators in higher education who recognize leadership disparities and inequities and who have the desire to do something about them. You must meet the following criteria to participate in this study: 1. Be 18 years of age or older 2. Reside in the United States 3. Be employed full-time as a senior higher education administrator at a four-year predominantly white institution in North Carolina 4. Have a minimum of five years of experience as a higher education senior administrator 5. Hold a doctoral degree Do you meet each of the criteria above?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

End of Block: Study Overview

Start of Block: Consent Form

Q2 Great! You are eligible to participate. Before collecting basic demographic information, let me share a few more details about my study and your participation.

Title of Study: Confronting the Systems that Perpetuate Disparities and Inequities Experienced by Minoritized Administrators within Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Todd Maberry | temaberr@ncsu.edu | 919-403-3665

NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach | alyssa_rockenbach@ncsu.edu
You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research to make an informed decision.

Procedures You will participate in a 60-to-90-minute interview where I will ask you questions about your experiences as a higher education administrator, as well as people who have been professionally influential. The interview will take place in person whenever possible, and via Zoom when in-person is not possible. For an in-person interview, you will be given the

opportunity to select a location that is a private, comfortable place to discuss these topics. For a Zoom interview, I will use a private computer and secure internet connection. I will also invite you to share any of your published materials related to this study, as well as any related documents like institutional emails, policies, or written protocols/handbooks/guides/standard operating procedures.

Recording The interview will be video/audio recorded and transcribed. To protect your identity, I will remove or alter (deidentify) any information from the transcript that might reveal your identity, and we will replace your name and any other identifiable information with pseudonyms in the transcript. Recordings will be deleted after transcription. You have the right to choose not to be recorded; however, if you choose not to be recorded, you will be unable to participate in this study.

Risks and Discomforts There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. However, if you are asked a question that you do not wish to respond to, you may choose not to answer.

Confidentiality I will keep your information confidential within the limits of the law, but due to the nature of the internet there is a chance that someone could access information that may identify you without permission. Furthermore, confidentiality may not be maintained if you indicate that you may do harm to yourself or others or report abuse of a child, disabled, or elderly persons. For any presentations, publications, or other products sharing the findings of this research, I will use pseudonyms for you to maintain confidentiality.

Compensation You will not receive payment for participating in this research. I will create an executive summary that highlights the findings of the research and share it with you.

Voluntary Participation in this study is voluntary. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. If you have any questions about the research or how it is implemented, please contact the student researcher, Todd Maberry, at temaberr@ncsu.edu and 919-403-3665. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research: Alyssa Rockenbach, at alyssa_rockenbach@ncsu.edu and 919-830-8578. Please reference study number 27568 when contacting anyone about this project. If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

* To participate, choose the “I consent” buttons below. If you do not want to participate, click the “I do not consent” button below or exit the window.

- I consent (1)
- I DO NOT consent (2)

End of Block: Consent Form

Start of Block: Demographic Information

Q3 Please provide the following information

First Name

Q4 Last Name

Q5 Email

Q6 Phone Number

Q7 What is your age?

Q8 How do you describe your race and ethnicity?

Q9 How do you describe your gender identity?

Q10 What is the name of the institution where you completed your doctoral work?

Q15 What year did you complete your doctoral work?

Q11 What is the name of your current employer?

Q12 What is your current job title?

Q13 How many years have you worked in your current role?

Q14 How many years total have you worked in higher education?

End of Block: Demographic Information

Appendix C

Email Communications to Participants

Comm #1: Initial Invitation

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Higher Education Leadership Research

Dr. [insert name],

I am a current PhD student at NC State University, a part of the Equity, Opportunity, and Justice cohort of the Higher Education Leadership program. For my dissertation, I am addressing the current disparities found in higher education senior leadership, which include a lack of gender and racial representation, as well as discrimination and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators. My research will be a qualitative phenomenological study that will feature senior administrators recognized by their peers as people who are effective in addressing, dismantling, and reimagining the institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gendered and racialized disparities and inequities in higher education administration. The purpose of this study is to provide guidance for senior administrators in higher education who recognize leadership disparities and inequities and who have the desire to do something about them. You can see more details about my research project in the attached document.

As a part of my research design, I have an advisory group of women and/or people of color who are guiding my research. I asked my advisory group to recommend current senior administrators who they think are effective at confronting leadership disparities in higher education. Dr. [insert name] quickly recommended you and said I must talk to you!

Would you be willing to support my research by completing an interview with me about your experiences as a higher education administrator?

If your answer is yes, [please follow the link](#) here to determine your eligibility to participate, receive more details about my research project, and provide some basic information. After completing this informed consent, I will follow up promptly to schedule the interview. If you have any questions, I would be glad to answer them and provide further information. I hope to get the chance to learn from you!

All the best,

Todd Maberry

Ph.D. Student
Higher Education Equity, Opportunity, & Justice
College of Education
NC State University

Comm #2: Scheduling Interview

Subject: Scheduling the Interview

Thank you for completing the informed consent form! Congratulations, you qualify for my study!

I would love to find a time that works for you to complete the interview. I am happy to meet you anywhere that is comfortable/convenient for you, I can host you at my office on Duke's campus, or we can do a Zoom if you prefer that method.

[Click here to schedule a time that works for you.](#) The link will allow you to choose your time and location preference.

Let me know if you have any questions. I look forward to connecting with you soon!

Todd

Comm #3: 3 Days Before Interview

Subject: Interview Reminder [insert date and time]

Dr. [insert name],

As a reminder, our interview is scheduled for **[insert day, time, and location]**. During our time together, I will be asking questions to draw out stories from your experiences as a higher education leader. If you want to see how I plan to guide the conversation, my interview protocol is on the last two pages of the attached document. It is not necessary for you to review it ahead of time; I share it only in case it is helpful to you.

As a way for me to prepare for our interview, would you be able to point me to any documents you have written related to how you have attempted to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership? It could be something published, or it could be any related documents like institutional emails, policies, or written protocols/handbooks/guides/standard operating procedures. Please do not spend significant time on this and only send me what comes immediately to mind and is easily accessible. You are also welcome to send me anything after our interview, and it is no problem if you do not have anything written to share with me.

I know time is your most important resource, and I am deeply grateful that you are willing to give your time engaging in this research with me. I look forward to our conversation!

All the best,

Todd

Comm #4: Interview Follow-up (Transcript Complete)

Subject: Sharing the Transcript

Dr. [insert name],

Thank you very much for sharing your wisdom with me in our interview earlier this past week. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation and received so many great insights from you!

I have created a transcript of our conversation and am attaching it to this email so you can see it. I have given you a pseudonym [insert pseudonym here] and I have de-identified any specific details that might link this transcript directly back to you. If you wish to make any edits, you are welcome to do so. And if you have any additional thoughts on how we can make higher education into a space where more women and people of color can flourish in leadership roles, I would be glad to have those insights!

It is not necessary for you to respond here; what is important is that you have the power to make any changes or add anything you wish.

In the coming months I will be analyzing the data together with other similar conversations I am having. Once I have some findings, I plan to create an executive summary that I will share with you.

I hope the best for you and your work. If I can ever be supportive of you, do not hesitate to contact me.

All the best,

Todd

Appendix D

Advisory Group Communications

Comm #1: Invitation to Participate

Subject: Help Support My Doctoral Work: \$500 Honorarium

Dr. [insert name],

I am a PhD student at the College of Education at NC State studying higher education leadership. Specifically, my dissertation addresses the problem of a lack of women and people of color represented in senior higher education leadership roles (president, vice president, provost, dean, etc.), as well as the experiences of discrimination women and people of color face while serving in those leadership roles. My research focuses on the senior leaders who are known for addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership. If you want more details, attached is an overview of my doctoral work.

I just finished coursework and received approval from my dissertation committee to move forward with my research. A key aspect of my research design is to have an advisory group comprised of current senior higher ed leaders who identify as women and/or people of color. I am deeply grateful for the ways you have supported my research up to this point, and I wanted to invite you to be a part of my advisory committee.

The advisory group will have no meetings, and I estimate it will take approximately 3 to 5 hours of your time total. The work will be divided into two phases as follows:

Phase 1: Recommend Participants (~1-2 hours) – Provide me with the names and contact information of 2 to 4 people who are current NC higher education administrators who you think are effective at addressing the problem of gender and racial disparities in higher ed leadership for a 60-to-90-minute interview with me about their experiences as a higher ed leader. The estimated start time is mid-February 2025 after IRB approval.

Phase 2: Feedback on Findings (~2-3 hours) – After I have completed the interviews and analyzed the data, I will write a draft of my findings. I will invite you to read the draft and provide any feedback on areas of agreement or disagreement, what resonated with you, etc. I estimate that it will be July or August 2025 before I will have the findings drafted.

I am aware that women and people of color are frequently asked to do unpaid labor, and I feel strongly that this work should be compensated. I have received small grants for my research work, and I am able to provide an honorarium of \$500 for your participation in the advisory group, which will be paid out after the completion of the first phase.

Would you let me know if you are able to and willing to be a part of my doctoral advisory group? I am happy to answer questions or provide more insight if need be.

Thank you for considering!

All the best,

Todd Maberry
 Ph.D. Student
 Higher Education Equity, Opportunity, & Justice
 College of Education
 NC State University

Comm #2: Phase 1

Subject: Maberry Advisory Group Phase 1

Wonderful Advisory Group,

First, thank you. While I expect your involvement will take only a few hours, my entire research design hinges on your involvement. I could not do this without you, and I am deeply grateful you are willing to support my doctoral work!

I am thrilled to have an amazing team of people on this advisory group. Below is an overview so you can see who is participating. If you do not already know each other, I hope your paths cross at some point.

Great news! The NCSU IRB just approved me to begin my research, and I am ready to start interviews. I need your help recommending 2 or 3 participants for my research study. Here are the criteria from my dissertation proposal for participants in my study:

- 1) Must be employed full-time as a senior higher education administrator (Includes presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, deans, associate deans, provosts, etc.) at a four-year PWI institution in North Carolina
- 2) Hold a Doctoral degree
- 3) Have a minimum of five years of experience as a higher education senior administrator
- 4) Must be recommended as someone who is actively engaged in the work of addressing, dismantling, reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate disparities and inequities experienced by minoritized administrators within higher education

Who is an administrator you think has been effective at making space and empowering women and/or people of color?

Feel free to share your recommendations with me by replying to this email. I will follow up and invite the person to participate in an interview with me about their experiences as a higher ed administrator. I will follow the interview protocol in the attached document that has been approved by my dissertation committee.

Let me know if you have any questions. If talking directly is better than email, feel free to call or text me anytime (919-403-3665).

Thanks again for your participation!

All the best,

Todd Maberry

Comm #3: Phase 2

Subject: Maberry Advisory Group Phase 2 - 8/15 Deadline

Advisory Group,

I made good progress over the last few weeks on my dissertation. I have a draft (attached) of the chapter on my findings and am ready to receive your feedback.

Here are the three specific areas of feedback I would love to have from you:

1. Based on your experiences as a senior administrator, what resonated strongly with you?
2. Based on your experiences, does anything not resonate? Anything you disagree with? Anything that seems off or disjointed? Anything you think is problematic or offensive based on my position as a White man writing about this work?
3. What recommendations or suggestions do you have for my final chapter, where I will discuss the findings, as well as the implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research?

I recommend a 1–2-page response addressing the questions above. If it is easier for you, I would be glad to schedule a Zoom or phone call to simply talk through your feedback.

Given my ambitious writing timeline this month, I would love to have your feedback by Friday, August 15. Let me know if that is unreasonable or impossible given your circumstances, and we can work something out.

Finally, I am curious to hear what you are thinking about in terms of confidentiality. The dissertation will discuss this advisory group at various points, and depending on the feedback, I expect to quote you in chapter 5. Given the current climate, I am leaning towards de-identifying your contribution and using a pseudonym for you, much like I did for the research participants. Let me know if you have thoughts on this.

I am grateful for your involvement with my research, and given the current moment, I am especially grateful for the courage you have for the work that you do.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Todd

Appendix E

Dissertation Executive Summary

Dissertation in One Sentence: Be a good human and apply that mentality to systems.

Problem: For my research, I focused on senior administrators in higher education (i.e. presidents, vice presidents, deans, provosts, etc.). If you apply the lenses of gender and race to that population, two realities immediately jump out:

1. By any metric, women and people of color are underrepresented in top leadership roles.
2. Women and people of color in top leadership higher education roles experience discrimination related to their gender and/or race, a phenomenon that is well documented in the academic literature.

Research Questions: I was curious about who are the senior administrators that recognize this problem, what their experiences are, and what specifically they are doing about it. This led to the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of senior administrators known for promoting equity by addressing, dismantling, and reimagining institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?
2. What policies, processes, and strategies have senior administrators utilized to address, dismantle, and reimagine institutional systems and practices that perpetuate gender and racial disparities in higher education leadership?

Research Design: A challenge I had to address related to my positionality is how would I, as a White man, identify the leaders addressing racial and gender disparities in leadership? And how would I know if what I discovered in my research was accurate and trustworthy? To resolve this challenge, I employed a confidential advisory group of four current senior administrators who identify as women and/or people of color. This advisory group recommended participants and gave feedback on my findings, which had a heavy influence on the final version of the dissertation.

Research Method: I conducted a qualitative study in phenomenology. For my data analysis, I closely followed the steps outlined in *Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I also used NVIVO software to assist the data analysis process.

Conceptual Framework: The direction and structure of my study, as well as the analysis of my data were all guided by a conceptual framework that had three components. The framework blended Leader-Member Exchange (a leadership theory) and Intersectionality (a critical theory) together with Kezar and Posselt's (2020) Justice and Equity Framework, which is a model for senior administrators who wish to use their roles to advocate for equity and justice.

Research Participants: The study had nine participants, who are all senior administrators currently serving predominantly white institutions in North Carolina. They have high level positions with titles like Vice President, Vice Chancellor, Dean, etc. They were at a mix of large public and private four-year universities, with enrollments ranging from 10,000 to 40,000 students. Six of the participants identified as women; three identified as men. Six identified with a Black racial/ethnic identity, two were White, and one was Hispanic/Latino. Their ages ranged from 40 to 55. Combined, they had over 220 total years of higher education leadership experience. The participants' individual identities are strictly confidential.

Research Data: The data from the study consisted of semi-structured interviews with all nine participants, as well as 24 total documents submitted by the participants. The artifacts were relevant journal articles, news articles, strategic plans, organizational documents, and podcasts.

Findings: Consistent with IPA, five group experiential themes emerged from the data analysis. Two of the themes describe the extremely challenging current context. First, due to expanding anti-DEI laws and initiatives, participants are experiencing increasing *Pressure of the Political Climate*. This looks like words being banned, funding being cut, programs eliminated, and job responsibilities changing or disappearing. Second is the *Macro Impact of Microaggressions*. All participants experienced or witnessed microaggressions toward woman and people of color in higher education contexts, which has a compounding effect over time. The primary and overarching theme of the study is *Humanizing Higher Education by Apply a Human-Centered Mindset*. The administrators were engaging leadership disparities by treating people with love, dignity, and respect and applying that mentality to the systems they influence. Specifically, it looks like *Policies, Processes and Strategies to Humanize Higher Education Systems*. There was no quick fix strategy or overarching policy. Instead, the participants were using data to influence policy and resource decisions, creating processes to listen through feedback loops, writing context-specific strategic plans, and engaging in storytelling. Finally, the research participants were *Cultivating a Culture of Belonging to Include All Humans*. They were not specifically focusing their work on women and people of color; rather, they are creating environments that provide opportunities and access for all.

Key Takeaways:

1. The Tremendous Potential of a Humanizing Mindset to Move Higher Education Forward
2. Senior Administrators Need to Develop 'Resilience Tactics' to Persist in the Work
3. Senior Administrators Who Aspire to Humanize Higher Education Must Understand Their Context and Adapt Accordingly
4. To Build Community, One Must First Have Community

Recommendations For

Policymakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the humans impacted by your policies • Resist politicization and be data informed
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat people as human and apply that mentality to systems • Think and act with data and processes
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you resonate with the need to humanize higher education, consider an administrative role! • Conduct research to better understand what it means and what it looks like to humanize higher education and create belonging • Humanize the students in the classroom

Resources

- American Council on Education (<https://www.acenet.edu>)
- Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (<https://pullias.usc.edu/>)
- Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California (<https://race.usc.edu/>)
- Shared Equity Leadership model (<https://pullias.usc.edu/project/shared-equity-leadership/>)
- *The Caring University: Reimagining the Higher Education Workplace after the Great Resignation* by Kevin McClure
- *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education* by Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux, and Lynn Pasquerella