Professing Education

Special Issue
Associate/Assistant/Vice Deans Advancing Justice and Equity in Education

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Professing Education is a journal of the **Society of Professors of Education**. The Society was founded in 1902 when the National Society of College Teachers of Education was first formed in cooperation with the National Education Association. Among its early presidents were Charles DeGarmo and John Dewey. The Society is an interdisciplinary, professional and academic association open to all persons, both theoreticians and practitioners, engaged in teacher preparation or related activities. Its purpose is to serve the diverse needs and interests of the education professoriate. The Society's primary goal is to provide a forum for consideration of major issues, tasks, problems, and challenges confronting professional educators. We invite you to join us. Visit www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com for more information.

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From the Editors

This special issue of **Professing Education** includes work from the 14th annual International Conference on Education and Justice. Emerging from a deans' panel at the conference, the issue brings to light the experiences, strategies, dilemmas, and commitments of professors of education who find themselves in mid-level academic leadership positions. Often serving in multiple capacities, as both faculty and administrators, Assistant and Associate Deans play key roles in cultivating change in strategic and meaningful ways, yet they are nearly invisible in the literature in educational leadership. The stories embedded in this issue show the critical role that Associate Deans play in advancing Colleges of Education to better serve students, faculty, and communities. The stories also push us to think about leadership in new ways, as it is often something not aspired to by mid-level leaders, but something that they are called to do by others.

We are grateful to the consulting editor, Kevin Kumashiro, for both this issue and for the partnership. We thank Sohyun Meacham, guest editor, for her leadership as an editor and her contributions as an author. To all the contributing authors, we extend gratitude for your willingness to share your work as leaders.

The Constitution of the Society of Professors of Education *stated that the society shall emphasize the following:*
1.Promotion of an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the relationship between education and the social complexities in which professors of education function;
2.Recognition and appropriate utilization of the inherent power and responsibility of the Society in voicing its interest in and concern for the realization of desirable educational ends;
3. Concern for fostering inquiry into the history, current status, and future alternatives of the education professoriate. (SPE Constitution and Bylaws, 1969) At its core, Professing Education, was created by scholars engaged in teacher preparation to contemplate and discuss critical issues, major tasks, and problems and challenges facing our profession."
(Armstrong, J (2009). A brief history of SPE. *Professing Education 4*(2).
https://societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/professing-education.pdf)

In this context, SPE scholar/teacher/members created *Professing Education* to contemplate and promote discussion of critical issues, major tasks, and problems and challenges facing our profession. At its core, *Professing Education* is about engagement. We invite you to continue the conversation by joining SPE, proposing a special issue (by emailing one or all of the editors) and/or participating in the SPE annual conference.

Gretchen Givens Generett, Paula Groves Price, and
Mary Kay Delaney, co-editors

Special Issue: Associate/Assistant/Vice Deans Advancing Justice and Equity in Education

Foreword

The challenges facing schools of education in this moment can feel overwhelming, ranging from the rhetoric from politicians and pundits that demonize universities and educators for all sorts of purported evils or dangers (especially related to diversity, equity, and inclusion), to initiatives to censor protest and silence counter narratives (and the chilling effect and anticipatory compliance that result); from the reshaping of curriculum to be based more in ideology than in truth, to the defunding of universities and research; from the demographic cliff that is shrinking enrollments and the reverberating effects of a global pandemic, to the transformative impacts of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies in education; from recent court decisions and waves of legislation that have fundamentally reversed decades of gains in civil and human rights in education, to the polycrises in broader society (threatening democracy, peace, the economy, the climate, and so on) that raise the stakes of what we do in education; and so much more. In schools of educations, leaders are constantly asking how we are to name this political moment, what it means for a school of education to intervene, and perhaps most immediately, what role is to be played by each and any leader.

In my own work providing consultancy and professional development for leaders in schools of education, I have drawn heavily on progressive social movements, particularly the conceptual frameworks and cross-sector approaches used to advance justice in schools and societies. Particularly compelling to me is the theme of leadership as a collective endeavor, which not only troubles the notion of transformative leadership but also invites imagination and expansion of the scope and potential impact of various leadership positions and roles. That is, as

we inquire about what it means for schools of education to have a different impact in the world, we must also envision them to have very different kind of leaders—including one such group that plays a crucial role in the functioning and transformation of institutions but that is too often overlooked, including in the research literature: the associate deans!

Therefore, I am grateful that this Special Issue focuses on the role of associate, assistant, and vice deans in advancing justice in and through schools of education. This collection of five chapters is nothing short of groundbreaking. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical traditions and research methodologies, and reflecting much diversity in social identity, geography, type of institution, and job responsibilities, the chapters nonetheless coalesce around several key themes about how identity and diversity matter in our work; how leading toward justice involves diving into contradictions of institutions and of political change; how leadership roles are most effective when approached with a commitment to collective action as well as to compassionate relations to self and others; and perhaps most saliently, how the role of associate, assistant, and vice deans provides unique opportunities to intervene in this political moment.

This Special Issue builds on the vital work of the national network, Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE), founded in 2016 to support what is now hundreds of deans and other leaders in speaking and acting collectively regarding policies, reforms, and public debates in order to advance equity and justice in education. Although our most publicly visible work has been our research briefs and statements about policies and reform initiatives, much of our internal work has centered on our own professional development, as by developing our *Framework for Assessment and*

Transformation (discussed in several articles in this issue) as well as organizing conferences, webinars, affinity groups, and collaborations. Over the past two years, some of these initiatives have focused specially on associate/assistant/vice deans, including a webinar series about the associate dean role and an affinity group for associate/assistant/vice deans of Color.

In December 2024, members of this affinity group presented a panel session about how associate deans of Color were working to advance justice in their schools of education—they did so at the 14ᵗʰ International Conference on Education and Justice (held in Honolulu, Hawaiʻi). Centered on the theme of "*Collectively advancing education, democracy, and human rights in times of their dismantling,*" the conference aimed to highlight the role of educational scholars in anti-oppressive movement building, particularly when we produce scholarship collectively and leverage it for public pedagogy. Models for the conference included recent projects by EDJE, the Hawaiʻi Scholars for Education, Social Justice and Diversity (HSESJD), and other groups that ranged from large informal networks to even just pairs of colleagues—all strategically sharing their research through background briefs or media articles, testimonies or interviews, grassroots organizing, and so on with the aim of changing policy, practice, curriculum, and public awareness. The conference particularly highlighted presentations of works-in-progress (scholarship, curriculum, programs, and initiatives) and encouraged dialogue during the sessions in order to learn from others and apply or extend or build on or simply find inspiration from their work, all with the hopes of sharing research and resources and to build networks and other collaborations for advancing equity and justice in education.

The associate/assistant/vice dean panel inspired this Special Issue, which is the fourth such collaboration between the annual conferences and *Professing Education*. As the conference organizer and the co-founder of EDJE, I am grateful for the insights, humility, and leadership of the contributors—Charisse

Cowan Pitre; Julian Vasquez Heilig, Catalina Concha Ormsby, and Crystal Chambers; Sohyun "Soh" Meacham and Colleen Mulholland; Yukari Takimoto Amos; and Leah Hollis—and especially for the vision, skillfulness, and labor of guest editor Soh Meacham in producing this Special Issue, which is a brilliant intervention in educational research and intersectional justice. Thanks also to the reviewers of this Special Issue for their invaluable feedback; the editors of *Professing Education* and the leaders of the Society of Professors of Education for their ongoing partnership; and to you, the readers, who are invited to engage with the ideas in these articles as we collectively build a stronger movement for equity and justice in education.

--Kevin Kumashiro, Conference Organizer, co-founder of Education Deans for Justice and Equity, and author of *Surrendered: Why Progressives are Losing the Biggest Battles in Education*

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Introduction

Advancing Justice from the Middle: The Power and Promise of Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans

Sohyun Meacham, Guest Editor

Higher education is being reshaped in profound and often perilous ways. Across the United States, the role of education in a diverse democracy is being questioned, censored, and defunded. Institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are increasingly politicized, and academic leaders committed to justice work are often required to navigate this volatile terrain with limited authority and substantial scrutiny. In this context, Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans (ADs) stand at a particularly precarious and powerful intersection—positioned between faculty and upper administration, between institutional rhetoric and operational reality.

This special issue of *Professing Education*, titled "Associate/Assistant/Vice Deans Advancing Justice and Equity in Education," emerges from this moment of tension, urgency, and possibility. It centers the lived experiences, strategies, dilemmas, and commitments of mid-level academic leaders who are reshaping institutions from within. The contributors to this issue offer powerful, grounded, and deeply personal accounts of what it means to lead for justice—not from the top-down, but from the often-overlooked middle.

Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans are frequently tasked with implementing DEI efforts, managing faculty development, overseeing academic programs, and addressing the everyday challenges that arise when institutional commitments collide with structural inertia. Yet despite their centrality to academic operations, these leaders are often rendered invisible in the literature on educational leadership and

institutional change. This special issue aims to change that. It brings together five compelling manuscripts that illuminate the diverse ways mid-level leaders are cultivating trust, reimagining equity, resisting performative gestures, building cross-racial solidarities, and disrupting exclusionary leadership norms—often at personal and professional cost.

Each article in this issue was written during a time of heightened anti-DEI rhetoric, when even naming equity work publicly could draw unwanted scrutiny. And yet, the authors did not shy away. Instead, they leaned in—offering rigorous inquiry, reflective storytelling, and unapologetic commitments to justice. Together, their work expands how we understand educational leadership and invites us to consider new epistemologies, geographies, and solidarities that shape what justice can look like in higher education.

This issue was born in conversation with Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE), a collective of deans and associate deans committed to advancing systemic equity across colleges of education. The EDJE "Framework for Assessment and Transformation" (Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2019) served as both a conceptual backdrop and a practical tool for several of the contributors. Whether explicitly named or implicitly reflected in the manuscripts, the framework's emphasis on institutional culture, policy, pedagogy, and practice underscores the work presented here.

We open this issue with **Charisse Cowan Pitre's A Black Teacher Educator's Leadership Journey to Advance Justice,** a

rich and textured narrative that exemplifies what it means to step into leadership not out of ambition for position, but out of fidelity to community, ancestry, and justice. Cowan Pitre, a Black woman faculty member turned associate dean at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Pacific Northwest, invites us to see leadership as fundamentally relational—anchored, as she writes, in "who I am, and whose I am." Her narrative is deeply personal, grounded in the wisdom inherited from her ancestors and family, and framed by the complexity of navigating predominantly White educational spaces while holding fast to Black feminist traditions of care, community, and liberation (Cooper, 2018).

What is striking about Cowan Pitre's journey is that leadership was not an aspiration she pursued but a responsibility she accepted when justice work demanded it. Her early leadership roles—as short-term program director and later as department chair—were framed as service to colleagues and students rather than as stepping stones to higher office. But the murder of George Floyd in 2020, followed by widespread institutional commitments to antiracism, shifted her trajectory. In that moment of societal reckoning, she stepped into an endowed chair role dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). From there, she helped build the infrastructure for lasting equity work in her college, work that would eventually lead to the creation of an associate deanship focused on educational justice initiatives—a position she now holds.

Central to her article is the integration of the Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) Framework for Assessment and Transformation, which her college adopted under the leadership of then-consultant Kevin Kumashiro. This framework provided both language and structure for institutional transformation, addressing areas such as governance, curriculum, and faculty development. Cowan Pitre details how her college moved beyond surface-level committee work to build capacity through intentional

professional development, collaborative planning, and resource allocation. This work was not easy. As she candidly recounts, faculty and staff were exhausted, trust had eroded due to prior leadership, and commitment to justice work varied widely across the community. Yet through coalition building and the use of a shared framework, they established concrete strategies—ranging from leadership accountability structures to sustained professional learning opportunities—that shifted the college's culture toward a more justice-centered ethos.

Cowan Pitre's reflection is particularly timely given the current backlash against DEI efforts in higher education. She writes from the perspective of someone who has experienced isolation as a Black woman academic leader, someone who knows both the costs and the power of refusing to step away from justice work even when it is politicized or delegitimized. Her narrative underscores that transformative leadership is not about holding a title but about cultivating rootedness, solidarity, and vision even in precarious times. Indeed, her metaphor of the weathered Black Lives Matter sign still affixed to a neighbor's door years after its initial placement serves as a powerful image of perseverance: justice work may lose its public momentum, but those who are committed remain steadfast, weathered but unbroken.

In highlighting her own lived experience and situating it alongside structural change, Cowan Pitre offers an important lesson for mid-level leaders across higher education: leadership for equity cannot be performative or temporary. It must be anchored in personal identity, collective wisdom, and actionable strategies. Her work illustrates how mid-level leaders—so often tasked with implementing decisions made above them while supporting those they lead—can actually leverage their positionality to advance systemic change. She does so while holding onto her sense of "somebodiness" (King, 1967), demonstrating that Black women's leadership is both an act of resistance and an act of healing.

By beginning the issue with Cowan Pitre's article, we foreground a key theme of this special

issue: justice-oriented leadership is not simply about occupying administrative roles; it is about transforming those roles into sites of resistance, restoration, and possibility. Her work reminds us that even when institutions falter, mid-level leaders can, and do, create enduring change—work that is weathered but steadfast, just like that solitary sign of solidarity.

In **Creating Access and Opportunity: How Mid-Level Academic Leaders and Their Campus Partners Implement and Support Innovative Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Recruitment, authors Julian Vasquez Heilig, Catalina Concha Ormsby, and Crystal Chambers Julian Vasquez Heilig, Catalina Concha Ormsby, and Crystal Chambers** bring forward a timely and necessary examination of one of higher education's most enduring equity challenges: recruitment and access**.** Their article situates recruitment not as a bureaucratic process but as a profound act of justice. Through their analysis, we see how Associate and Assistant Deans, often positioned at the nexus of faculty, administration, and community partnerships, are uniquely situated to transform institutional pathways into durable structures of inclusion.

The authors focus on three public research universities—University of Michigan, Western Michigan University, and University of Kentucky—each serving as a case study for innovative approaches to DEI recruitment. They draw on social and cultural capital theory, framing access not merely in terms of who is recruited, but also in terms of how systems of knowledge, relationships, and institutional resources are mobilized to remove barriers and create belonging. In these cases, mid-level leaders were instrumental in designing programs that addressed long-standing inequities: pipeline initiatives that connected undergraduate and graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds to faculty mentorship; targeted hiring programs with accountability measures; and collaborative strategies with human resources and external partners to widen applicant pools

and dismantle biases built into traditional search processes.

What makes this article particularly powerful is its attention to process and structure. The authors resist simplistic "best practices" lists and instead illuminate how mid-level leaders cultivate the conditions for lasting change. This includes building coalitions across units, leveraging data to reveal inequities in recruitment outcomes, and negotiating for resources to sustain initiatives beyond short-term grants or temporary funding streams. In doing so, they make visible a form of leadership often invisible in scholarship: leaders who may not have ultimate hiring authority but who nonetheless shape recruitment priorities, develop infrastructure, and model accountability. These leaders occupy a strategic position, with proximity to both upper administration and academic programs, which allows them to respond nimbly to emerging needs while addressing systemic constraints.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in its integration of social and cultural capital theory with institutional leadership studies. By foregrounding how capital—both social relationships and cultural knowledge—is unevenly distributed and recognized within recruitment, the authors reveal why traditional "neutral" recruitment processes perpetuate inequality. Mid-level leaders, they argue, can intervene precisely because they often understand these inequities from both sides: they see how policies are crafted at the top and how they are experienced at the program level. This positional insight enables them to create recruitment pathways that not only bring in more diverse faculty and students, but also foster conditions for them to thrive.

At the same time, the article acknowledges significant challenges. Recruitment work often collides with entrenched institutional cultures resistant to change. Mid-level leaders frequently face pushback for prioritizing DEI in hiring, whether due to political scrutiny, lack of resources, or competing institutional priorities. Yet, as the authors demonstrate, mid-level leaders who view recruitment as justice work do

not wait for perfect conditions. Instead, they leverage relationships, data, and a moral imperative to push forward—even when doing so comes at professional or political cost.

This article resonates deeply with the aims of this special issue. It reframes recruitment not as an operational function but as an ethical commitment and strategic opportunity to reshape who belongs in our institutions. It also highlights how mid-level leadership can serve as an engine of transformation, translating institutional mission statements into actionable, equitable practices. At a time when DEI initiatives are increasingly under attack, these stories of mid-level leaders who persist and innovate remind us that meaningful equity work often happens in the "middle spaces"—those less visible but deeply consequential zones where leaders translate vision into reality.

In **From Silence to Strategy: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Cross-Racial Academic Leadership, Sohyun "Soh" Meacham, an Asian American Associate Dean, and Colleen Mulholland,** a White woman Dean, share their intertwined leadership journey through paired narratives**.** Their work is both personal and analytical, using their professional relationship as a lens to examine how mid-level leadership development can emerge from intentional dialogue, mutual trust, and structural opportunities. While the article acknowledges the positional and racial differences between the authors, it does not dwell on fear or avoidance. Instead, it foregrounds how conversation and partnership created pathways for both.

The article begins with a defining interaction: Meacham's request for early promotion to full professor. For Meacham, this was more than a procedural step; it carried the weight of navigating academic advancement as an Asian American woman who had previously felt invisible in predominantly White institutions. Rather than simply addressing criteria for promotion, Mulholland approached the conversation as an opening to discuss leadership aspirations more broadly. This pivot—from procedural review to strategic visioning—shifted their relationship and ultimately the trajectory of Meacham's career. Together, they explored what leadership could look like for someone with her skill set and commitments, resulting in a reframing of leadership not as an external destination but as an opportunity to lead from within the college.

The authors detail how this initial conversation grew into an ongoing partnership. Mulholland took deliberate steps to create leadership opportunities that aligned with institutional needs and Meacham's areas of expertise. This included revising administrative portfolios and supporting professional development that positioned Meacham to step into a broader leadership role. For Meacham, these opportunities countered past experiences of marginalization, affirming that her leadership capacity was not only recognized but actively cultivated. The mutual reflection shared in the article demonstrates how leadership development can be co-constructed rather than hierarchical, emerging from dialogue, sponsorship, and a willingness to adapt organizational structures to meet both individual and institutional goals.

A distinguishing feature of this article is its methodological approach. By using collaborative autoethnography, the authors place their voices side by side, illustrating how their perspectives sometimes converged and sometimes diverged. This method highlights not only what happened but how meaning was made in the process. Moments of uncertainty and difference are acknowledged, not as signs of failure but as points of learning, revealing that building trust across positional and racial differences requires intentionality and persistence. The narrative itself becomes evidence that leadership is not just what leaders do but how they make sense of doing it together.

The article also clarifies the difference between mentorship and sponsorship in practice. While mentorship provided Meacham with guidance and feedback, sponsorship involved tangible action: advocating for her promotion, restructuring roles, and supporting participation

in leadership networks. This distinction is crucial in understanding how mid-level leaders, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, can be supported not only through advice but also through concrete institutional investment. By narrating these practices from both perspectives, the article provides a model for how leaders can intentionally cultivate emerging leadership within their own colleges.

Placed within the broader themes of this special issue, From "Silence to Strategy" highlights how mid-level leadership is both relational and strategic. It shows how associate deans and deans can partner to build equity-minded leadership capacity, aligning individual aspiration with systemic opportunity. The article emphasizes proactive engagement, structural innovation, and a shared commitment to justice-oriented leadership development. In doing so, it challenges higher education to see leadership not as a fixed hierarchy but as a co-created process that, when done intentionally, benefits both individuals and institutions.

By including this article in the special issue, we amplify a model of leadership development that is both deeply human and highly practical. It reminds us that building pathways for diverse leaders is not accidental—it is the result of deliberate conversation, trust, and structural action. And it affirms that mid-level leadership, when approached as a collaborative and equity-focused endeavor, has the power to transform both people and the systems they serve.

Yukari Takimoto Amos's "Stereotypes, Perceptions, and Emotions: An Asian Woman Leader's Leadership Dilemma" brings forward an underexamined yet profoundly important perspective in educational leadership scholarship: the experience of Asian women leaders navigating entrenched racialized and gendered stereotypes. Her article not only documents these dynamics but also examines the emotional toll and professional consequences they carry, offering readers both a critical analysis and a deeply

personal account of leadership at the intersection of race, gender, and cultural expectation.

Amos highlights a core paradox that many Asian women leaders encounter, framing it as a tension around authenticity. In mainstream Western contexts, leadership is often associated with assertiveness, visibility, and charisma—traits historically coded as masculine and white. Yet, Asian women are frequently stereotyped as deferential, quiet, and submissive. When Asian women leaders perform leadership in ways that align with dominant norms—speaking assertively, making bold decisions, or seeking visibility—they risk being perceived as inauthentic or abrasive, violating the stereotypes imposed upon them. Conversely, when they lean into expected passivity or collectivism, they are often dismissed as lacking authority or capability. Either way, they face professional and social penalties for simply being themselves.

This dynamic creates what Amos describes as a double bind: a no-win scenario in which every leadership act is read through lenses shaped by systemic bias rather than professional merit. Her analysis illustrates how these stereotypes are not individual misperceptions but structural conditions embedded in higher education. They manifest in hiring and promotion practices, informal workplace dynamics, and even in how leaders are evaluated for emotional intelligence or "fit." Asian women leaders, she argues, are often excluded from informal networks where trust and influence are cultivated, compounding the isolation that many women of color experience in leadership roles.

A distinctive contribution of Amos's article is its focus on emotion—not as a personal weakness but as an essential element of leadership that is too often ignored. She reflects on the emotional costs of constantly navigating stereotypes, highlighting feelings such as frustration and exhaustion. These emotions are not incidental; they are shaped by institutional cultures that deny Asian women leaders full legitimacy. By naming these emotional dimensions, Amos resists narratives that expect women leaders of color to absorb harm silently

or to demonstrate "resilience" without examining the structures that necessitate resilience in the first place.

Importantly, Amos does not leave readers with despair but with insight and possibility. She highlights how recognizing and naming stereotypes is a first step toward dismantling them, both individually and collectively. Institutions must develop intentional strategies to challenge stereotypes about Asian women leaders, including equity-minded professional development for search committees, leadership teams, and faculty peers. She also emphasizes the need for mentoring and affinity spaces where women leaders of color can process their experiences, strategize for authentic leadership practices, and find solidarity.

This article aligns closely with the overarching goals of this special issue. It reminds us that justice-centered leadership requires more than diversifying leadership pipelines—it requires transforming the cultural logics that determine whose leadership is legible and legitimate. Amos's analysis offers a critical counterpoint to narratives of leadership authenticity that assume a universal standard of what a "good leader" looks or acts like. Instead, she invites readers to consider authenticity as relational and context-specific, influenced by race, gender, and cultural histories.

By including Amos's voice in this collection, we broaden the conversation about mid-level leadership to include the lived experiences of those who often remain invisible in leadership discourse. Her reflections challenge all of us—whether we are leaders, colleagues, or institutional stakeholders—to examine how perceptions are formed and how they shape emotional and professional landscapes. In doing so, Amos not only contributes to scholarship but also offers a form of praxis: a call to reimagine leadership evaluation and development in ways that allow Asian women leaders, and by extension all leaders of color, to lead authentically without penalty.

Leah Hollis's Beyond Optics: uBuntu Leadership as Counter Perspective to

Performative Allyship directly addresses a challenge increasingly visible in higher education: the rise of performative diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Many institutions, particularly in times of social upheaval, are quick to produce public-facing DEI statements, task forces, or symbolic gestures. Yet, as Hollis argues, these initiatives often lack the structural and cultural commitment necessary to create real change. Her article explains this tendency as "performative allyship" (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Stephenson, 2024)—efforts more focused on optics than on substantive transformation—and offers an alternative rooted in uBuntu leadership, a philosophy derived from African traditions emphasizing interconnectedness, mutual care, and collective responsibility.

Hollis begins by critiquing the gap between what institutions say and what they do. She highlights how performative gestures, such as one-time training events or high-profile diversity hires without institutional support, can erode trust among faculty, staff, and students. Instead of dismantling inequitable systems, these actions often preserve the status quo by creating the appearance of progress while leaving oppressive structures intact. She notes that such practices also create an emotional burden for leaders committed to equity—especially leaders of color—who are often called upon to legitimize or sustain initiatives that lack resources or authority to effect meaningful change.

Against this backdrop, Hollis introduces uBuntu as an alternative leadership model. Originating from Southern African philosophy, uBuntu is often summarized as "I am because we are," emphasizing relational ethics and shared humanity (Mbiti, 1990). For Hollis, uBuntu leadership moves beyond symbolic allyship by centering humility, empathy, and accountability. Leaders guided by uBuntu recognize that their success is tied to the well-being of their communities; leadership becomes not a matter of personal advancement or public recognition but a practice of collective care and responsibility.

The article weaves together personal reflection and theoretical insight to show how

uBuntu leadership reorients institutional priorities. Hollis notes that in an uBuntu framework, equity work is not relegated to special offices or temporary initiatives but embedded into every aspect of the organization—from budgeting and hiring to curriculum and community engagement. This approach rejects the idea that DEI is a discrete, optional project and instead views it as a core institutional obligation. She provides examples of leaders who embody uBuntu by redistributing resources, cultivating inclusive decision-making processes, and holding themselves accountable to historically marginalized communities within and beyond the campus.

Hollis's intervention is particularly powerful because it offers both critique and possibility. She does not shy away from exposing how hollow gestures harm individuals and erode institutional credibility. Yet she also refuses to let cynicism dominate. Instead, she invites readers to imagine leadership grounded in relational ethics, one where care, reciprocity, and collective thriving replace individual achievement and institutional branding as measures of success.

This call to adopt uBuntu leadership is especially relevant for mid-level leaders like associate and assistant deans, who often face pressures to perform equity work without full authority or resources. Hollis's framework offers them a way to resist being co-opted into performative efforts and instead cultivate equity practices that are relational and enduring. By focusing on relationships and collective accountability, mid-level leaders can create change that transcends optics and builds trust among those they serve.

Placed at the close of this special issue, Hollis's article serves as both critique and roadmap. It compels us to examine our own leadership practices: Are we focused on appearances or on authentic change? Do our equity efforts invite shared responsibility, or do they rely on symbolic compliance? And perhaps most importantly, how might an ethic of uBuntu reframe leadership itself—not as a hierarchical exercise of power but as a communal practice of

care? In offering this counter perspective, Hollis not only challenges entrenched leadership norms but also provides a philosophical foundation for imagining a more just, more humane future for higher education.

Together, these five manuscripts remind us with striking clarity that mid-level leadership is not ancillary to institutional transformation—it is foundational. These articles demonstrate that the associate, assistant, and vice deans who inhabit these roles do far more than manage existing structures; they are often the ones who ask whether those structures are equitable, sustainable, and aligned with institutional values. Across the contributions, we see leadership defined not by formal authority alone, but by the capacity to act from the middle, to navigate tensions, and to create spaces for equity work to take root even in challenging climates.

From culturally responsive recruitment strategies that address systemic underrepresentation, to cross-racial mentoring relationships built on vulnerability and trust, to deeply personal examinations of how racialized and gendered stereotypes shape leadership perceptions, to the call for an ethic of care and interconnectedness drawn from uBuntu philosophy—these authors illustrate how mid-level leaders innovate in real time. Their work is inherently complex and emotionally charged: they contend with resistance, limited resources, and heightened scrutiny, often while carrying the emotional labor of representing marginalized communities or embodying equity values that are themselves politicized. And yet, these leaders continue to push forward, drawing on personal commitments, community values, and creative strategies to enact change.

What connects these authors is not just a shared administrative title or rank, but a shared ethical stance: a refusal to reproduce injustice and a commitment to lead otherwise. Their stories reveal leadership that is grounded in personal identity, cultural knowledge, and collective responsibility, demonstrating how those who occupy middle spaces often hold a unique vantage

point from which to confront inequity. Because mid-level leaders work closely with both senior administration and faculty, as well as faculty, staff, and students, they occupy positions where small interventions—whether in recruitment, mentoring, curriculum, or professional development—can ripple outward to shift institutional culture in meaningful ways (Christiansen, 2024). These manuscripts remind us that leadership for equity is often enacted in the moments that are least visible and most precarious, in the daily practices of people willing to disrupt business as usual.

The implications for higher education leadership development are profound. These authors challenge institutions to reconsider how leadership potential is recognized, cultivated, and rewarded. As Kezar and Holcombe (2017) have noted, traditional leadership pipelines often prioritize managerial efficiency, operational compliance, and institutional loyalty over critical consciousness and change agency. Too often, leaders are trained to keep things running rather than to question whether the things being run are just, inclusive, or aligned with mission. This special issue offers a different vision: one in which mid-level leadership explicitly includes equity and justice as core responsibilities rather than peripheral interests.

The models of leadership highlighted here are relational, reflexive, and resistant. They are relational in that they are built on trust, dialogue, and shared purpose, rather than on hierarchical authority alone. They are reflexive because these leaders continually examine how their own identities, positionalities, and institutional contexts shape their decisions and influence. And they are resistant because they actively push back against inequitable structures, refusing to allow institutional inertia or political pressures to dictate the limits of their commitments. In doing so, they demonstrate that equity leadership is not an add-on to administrative responsibility or a temporary project to be delegated when convenient. It is its own form of labor— emotional, intellectual, and relational—that requires intentional cultivation, deep listening, coalition-building, and policy courage.

In short, these five manuscripts invite higher education to see mid-level leaders not as implementers of other people's visions, but as visionaries in their own right. They call for leadership development programs that prepare and support leaders to engage in equity work as core professional practice. And they remind us that institutional transformation does not begin at the top alone—it also emerges from the middle, where people are doing the difficult, daily, and often invisible work of making higher education more just

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A Black Teacher Educator's Leadership Journey to Advance Justice

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Abstract

The paper presented here describes a Black professor's leadership journey and her experiences with collaborative leadership to advance equity in a College of Education. The personal narrative includes a description of collaborative work to become a justice-centered College of Education and includes one example of focused work to support faculty and staff professional development in the area of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). The author utilizes personal narrative to illuminate DEIB leadership experiences and her path to an associate dean role to support equity initiatives at the college level. The narrative presented also describes the College's work to build capacity for transformative change through engagement with the EDJE Framework for Assessment and Transformation (Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2019). This paper offers considerations and strategies for advancing justice in Colleges of Education, including ways to build support for women of color on the path to leadership in the academy.

My Roots: Teacher Educator and Leader, Anchored in Who I Am, and Whose I Am

I am a Black professor of teacher education in my fourth year as associate dean in the College of Education at my institution, a predominately white institution (PWI) in the Pacific Northwest. I grew up in the 1970s in Seattle, Washington, historically and currently one of the whitest large cities in the U.S. My family lived in an all-Black segregated neighborhood, along with other extended family members. My father did not attend college, and my mother returned to college to complete her undergraduate degree while she was a divorced, working single mother raising two daughters. I am the first in my family to earn a graduate degree and the only one to obtain a Ph.D. I attended predominantly white schools but lived in Seattle's Central District, the city's historically segregated, all-Black neighborhood. Raised in the same historically Black neighborhood and having attended the neighborhood public schools, my mother found a way to enroll us in private Catholic school because of the poor education she received as a Black student in the city's public schools.

I am a descendant of enslaved people with roots in Arkansas and Maryland. My maternal grandmother was born into a family of farmers in Pine Bluff, Arkansas in the 1920s. They were likely tenant farmers or sharecroppers since only 21% of Black farmers in Pine Bluff at that time owned their land. She was one of twelve children. Her family fled the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration, a time in our country's history when six million Black people left the South and migrated to Northern and Western cities for a better life. My paternal grandfather was raised in Maryland, but left at an early age, fabricating his age to join the army for economic opportunity and a better life.

I grew up with a deep understanding of the wisdom, incredible talents, gifts and values I inherited from all of my ancestors. These values

centered community, education as a means of liberation, a commitment to the common good, "lifting as we climb," and what Dr. King described as "somebodiness"—a deep belief in one's own worth, always feeling that one's life has ultimate significance (King, 1967). Although I was raised in the predominately White Pacific Northwest (PNW), within the Black community that surrounded me, these values were consistently modeled and nurtured throughout my growing up.

When I arrived in higher education, first as an undergraduate student in the 1980s and as a new assistant professor in the early 2000s, I was painfully unprepared for the isolation, marginalization, and oppression Black women, and other women of color, experience in the academy (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017, Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). In the U.S., Black women comprise 3% of tenure track full-time faculty at degree-granting post-secondary institutions (NCES, 2024) and 5.4% of all higher education administrators (Fuesting, 2023). Community, Black women, and other women of color have been paramount in my ability to persist as a faculty member in the academy over the last 27 years. The more time I spend in higher education, and especially now serving in leadership during a time of anti-DEI, I am more deeply aware of the ways being anchored in community and collective liberation has shaped my path and shown up in my work to advance justice within and beyond the university.

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE): A Foundation for Leadership and College-Wide Work to Advance Equity

When I reflect on the path to my current leadership role and how the inaugural equity-focused associate dean role came to be, the work of Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) under the leadership of Dr. Kevin Kumashiro was vitally important. In 2021, Dr. Kumashiro spent close to a year working with staff and faculty in our college to support our stated DEIB goals and

commitments. At that time, an interim dean had recently been appointed after a failed search to replace a dean who led the college for six years. For at least five or six years prior to Dr. Kumashiro's focused DEIB work with the college in 2021, the institutional context was challenging. It was a time of significant change for both the college and the institution with upper administration leadership transitions, financial challenges, the closure of programs and colleges, increased term faculty hires with reductions in tenure track positions, and expectations and urgency to grow enrollment through innovative new programs and online degree options. Faculty and staff were exhausted, and the College of Education returned to a question that was essential for us, "How does our Jesuit Catholic mission 'to develop leaders for a more just and humane world' show up in our academic programs and our college community—especially during these critical times of rapid change—and how do we remain anchored in our mission?"

Our college's focused work with Dr. Kumashiro in 2021, including an introduction to the EDJE Framework for Assessment and Transformation, helped lay the foundation for a leadership role within the college specifically focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). The actual position, Associate Dean for Faculty Development and Educational Justice Initiatives, emerged from the strategic and visionary leadership of Dean Cynthia B. Dillard who joined the College as Dean in 2022, one year after Dr. Kumashiro consulted with the College for an extended period to help us establish our DEIB priorities and action plan. A distinguished scholar of race, culture, gender, and spirituality in the context of education, Dean Dillard brought justice-centered leadership to the College immediately upon her arrival. There is no doubt that our College's prior work with Dr. Kumashiro and working with the EDJE Framework provided a critical foundation for the equity-focused structures and initiatives Dr. Dillard established when she became the first

African American Dean in the College's 90-year history.

In her life and leadership, Dean Dillard centers the ways of being and knowing of Black people and others—cultural knowledge and practices that have been ignored and excluded—because she believes centering our cultural knowledge provides a path to healing the world and healing education. Dr. Dillard consistently shares this vision with students, faculty, staff, alumni and community partners, showing up fully in her Blackness and creating space for others to show up fully as themselves. Her authenticity and skillful leadership have been vital to the College's ability to begin the long-overdue transformational work required to become a justice-centered college. In addition to equity-focused initiatives and external grants to support our justice-centered work, Dean Dillard worked with her leadership team to create structures to support the transformation of long-standing inequitable policies and practices. The associate dean role I currently hold emerged from our College's early work with Dr. Kumashiro and the EDJE Framework, as well as Dean Dillard's leadership to ensure continued engagement with the Framework's critical questions for assessment and action. The new associate dean role is just one example of Dean Dillard's leadership focused on the transformation of policies and practices that actively work against our stated justice and equity commitments.

The mission of the College of Education is anchored in advancing social justice, and I have been a faculty member in the Teacher Education Program for nineteen years. I arrived as an assistant professor, and my leadership journey began with a few short-term acting program director appointments. Short-term directorships and leading other community-engagement initiatives always felt just right to me in terms of leadership. I had no interest in permanent institutional leadership roles that would take me away from teaching and working in close partnership with K-12 schools to develop and support well-prepared, community-engaged,

equity-focused educators. After tenure and promotion to full professor, I reluctantly agreed to serve as chair of an interdisciplinary department during a period of significant change within the college. When the three-year chair appointment ended, I decided I would not continue. The academic year was coming to a close, and I was preparing for a year-long sabbatical. Then, the whole world watched the horrific 2020 police murder of George Floyd, recorded on a cellphone.

My institution joined the wide-spread commitments to justice and fighting racism, and our university developed a strategic plan to deepen the work the university had already been engaged in around DEIB. Under the leadership of the Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion, the university developed an inclusive excellence action plan for racial equity and antiracism. The racial justice action plan, LIFT (**Listen and learn; Impact through intentional action; Fail forward; Transform together**), was created to take strategic action to address systemic racism and enhance equitable practices throughout the university. LIFT was intended to enact and realize the university's larger strategic goals, including a goal to promote inclusive excellence across every aspect of the university and campus life. At the time, the university was also trying to determine how various divisions would engage meaningfully in the University's inclusive excellence/DEI plan.

From Surface Level, Isolated DEIB Committee Work to Deeper College-Wide Work

At the college level, now empowered by the university's racial equity action plan, the College of Education's Equity and Inclusion (E&I) Committee made a decision to approach the interim dean with a proposal to "get real" about the work of justice in the College. The E&I Committee was a relatively new committee, and the total membership was four faculty—all of whom identified as women (1 Asian American tenured professor, 1 Black tenured full professor,

1 Latinx term faculty member, and 1 White tenured full professor). The E&I faculty committee presented the interim dean with a proposal to reestablish the Committee as a financially resourced working group charged with establishing a concrete actionable plan to advance equity and antiracism within the College. Up to that time, the work of the committee felt surface level at best—with a general feeling that the committee had no power, or buy-in for that matter, to make substantive change and true progress toward a stated mission and commitment to center justice and antiracism in our work as a College of Education. No substantive work had been done beyond adoption of a shared stated mission: "The COE prepares ethical, reflective, transformative professionals to advance social, economic, and political justice in collaboration with local and global communities."

The interim dean and E&I Committee agreed that leadership and resources would be key to ensure substantive work to advance our commitments to equity and justice in the College. Working with the E&I Committee, the interim dean suggested a request to the provost allowing the College to appoint an internal endowed professor using funds from an endowment that historically supported an external visiting scholar. The request sought provost approval to allocate the funds for one year, as an exception to the practice and commitment to a visiting scholar outside of the university. Plans to pursue an external scholar had already been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Provost's Office approved the request. The internal endowed chair appointment would focus on advancing DEIB in the College over the course of a one-year appointment. The position was open to any faculty member within the College, a search was conducted, and I was fortunate to be appointed to the DEIB Endowed Chair role Fall Quarter 2020. The work of the endowed chair was intended to coordinate and align with that of the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion. Initial meetings between the interim dean and the College's Equity & Inclusion faculty working

group confirmed the scope of the work and the importance of alignment with the VP's office, including college-level work aligned with University commitments outlined in key documents such as the 2016 Final Report of the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusive Excellence, University Strategic Directions, and the LIFT Initiative, an action plan for racial equity developed by the University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

The endowed chair would not work in isolation, rather the chair would collaborate with the College's Equity and Inclusion Working Group, college faculty and staff, as well as members of the Interim Dean's Leadership Team. The primary duties of the endowed chair during the appointment period included: 1) working with faculty to set priorities for DEIB work in the College; 2) developing a proposal for sustainable and ongoing DEIB work in the College, in preparation for the hiring of a new dean; and 3) providing a written summary of work and recommendations to the new dean and to the College's faculty and staff in Fall Quarter 2021.

College-Wide Engagement with Dr. Kevin Kumashiro & The EDJE Framework for Assessment and Transformation

With the COE's new allocation of financial resources to advance DEIB work in the college, the first charge was to identify an external consultant to support the focused work over the course of the first year with the funded endowed chair leadership. This initial work was critical as it laid the foundation for continued work toward our shared goal of becoming a justice-centered College of Education. There was a unanimous decision to hire Dr. Kevin Kumashiro, an internationally recognized scholar and DEIB leader in higher education. Dr. Kumashiro had previously consulted with individual faculty, and the dean's office. Therefore, he was also seen as a trusted colleague with an established positive relationship with the College of Education.

During the E&I Working Group's first planning meeting with Dr. Kumashiro, his consulting role was further clarified with the agreement that he would serve as: 1) a college-wide facilitator, offering a series of DEIB professional development workshops for faculty and staff, and 2) a critical friend to the E&I Working Group, joining our biweekly closed meetings for collaboration and consultation. This was in addition to the work I was facilitating separately with the E&I Working Group and other faculty to provide additional DEIB professional development opportunities (DEIB book discussions, speaker series, community conversations with alumni, other university staff/faculty, and community partners).

Dr. Kumashiro customized professional development workshops for the College, so it was important that we learned areas of interest directly from our staff/faculty community. We surveyed faculty and staff for the purpose of determining areas of need or interest for targeted professional development in the area of DEIB or JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion). Faculty and staff were asked to complete the following survey.

SURVEY 1: Faculty & Staff Survey: Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (JEDI)

Directions: In preparation for our sessions with our external consultant, Dr. Kevin Kumashiro, please answer the following *three questions*.

1. What does Dr. Kumashiro need to know? _____ ?
2. What would you like to see him cover related to Justice, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (JEDI)? What would you like him to discuss? _____
3. The following are possible JEDI topics. What is of interest at this time? If you have other areas of interest, please add to the list.

    ○ Justice, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (JEDI) Terminology

    ○ JEDI Concepts Operationalized

    ○ Whiteness in Higher Education

    ○ Framework(s) for Advancing Justice, Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

    ○ [Other] What else?_

The survey response rate was slightly higher than fifty percent, and there were three primary interest areas for faculty/staff development: 1) Operationalization of JEDI Concepts, 2) Frameworks to Advance JEDI in Higher Education, and 3) JEDI Terminology – faculty interest in "shared understanding" and common language. In addition to sharing their primary areas of interest for professional development, we asked staff and faculty to also share any information they wanted Dr. Kumashiro to know as our external consultant, prior to his work and engagement with us as a College community. A summary of responses is provided below. Faculty and staff were asked the question, "What does Dr. Kumashiro need to know?

Summary of Responses to Survey 1: What Does Dr. Kumashiro Need to Know Prior to Engaging the College in JEDI Work?

Overall, survey responses revealed a college community experiencing significant tension, exhaustion, and lingering distrust—much of it rooted in long-standing inequitable structures and what some described as past harms from previous leadership. Many faculty and staff described a culture marked by inequity, hierarchy, and manifestations of white supremacy and anti-Blackness, alongside inconsistent understanding of DEI/JEDI concepts. While the survey revealed a genuine commitment to equity work, there were concerns that the college lacked shared language, clarity of goals, structures for accountability, and safe spaces for honest dialogue—especially around Whiteness, privilege, and systemic racism. Respondents noted that faculty and staff were at very different stages in terms of individual DEI development, with some individual faculty/staff unaware of their own harmful professional practices. It was also noted that students were often more culturally fluent than the faculty teaching them, and this was viewed as a significant issue. Despite these challenges, survey responses conveyed a strong desire to heal, rebuild trust, deepen community, and translate stated values into sustainable action, with many hoping that renewed focus and leadership would help move the college toward meaningful, collective progress.

Using the EDJE Framework to Support a Responsive DEIB Professional Development Plan

Based on the faculty and staff survey results, Dr. Kumashiro and the working group established a plan for college-wide DEIB professional development. The agreed upon format for Dr. Kumashiro's facilitated sessions with the full staff and faculty was a carefully sequenced, two-part DEIB workshop during previously scheduled all-college meetings. The interim dean allotted her scheduled all-College meetings for this important professional development based on the feedback from the initial faculty/staff survey to determine interest areas/needs. Dr. Kevin Kumashiro customized and facilitated the workshops, and the focus was on building the capacity of the staff and faculty in the area of DEIB.

One primary goal and two outcomes were established. The primary goal was to build the capacity of faculty and staff to advance the University's goals and priorities regarding diversity, equity, and justice by examining frameworks for institutional transformation, individual transformation, and key concepts. Prior to the workshops and other programming, there were two important outcomes we determined together as a community: 1) Discuss and illustrate the five guiding principles of the EDJE (Education Deans for Justice and Equity) Framework for Assessment and Transformation, and 2) Discuss and illustrate working definitions of Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Whiteness (JEDIW) and related concepts, as well as a sample framework for operationalizing these into goals for action plans.

During Dr. Kumashiro's sessions, faculty, staff and leadership were introduced to the *EDJE Framework for Assessment and Transformation* (EDJE, 2019), and COE staff/faculty found it to be a practical and a vital resource that could be immediately implemented to support work in a range of areas including, governance, curriculum, student support, staff experience and faculty affairs. The EDJE Framework identifies thirteen essential priority areas and critical questions grouped into four categories: (A) Governance and Finance, (B) Teaching and Learning, (C) Faculty and Staff, and (D) Partnerships and Public Impact. The EDJE Framework's priority areas and essential questions are intended to be adapted as appropriate for the setting and utilized for the purpose of advancing equity and justice, both in the field of education and in Colleges of Education.

In addition to the DEIB professional development facilitated by Dr. Kumashiro, other college-wide programming was provided. DEIB Programming implemented during this time included ongoing professional development (PD) opportunities for individuals and small groups of faculty/staff, whole college PD sessions, COE virtual events/DEIB speakers, and staff/faculty discussion groups. Workshops and other programming were also offered to other community members including students, community partners, alumni, and other university staff/faculty. Throughout the time with Dr. Kumashiro and regularly under the DEIB endowed chair's leadership, per faculty/staff request, there were some closed PD sessions that were tailored to specific interests and needs shared by College staff and faculty.

Over the course of the endowed chair appointment in 2021, the chair arranged and co-led a series of DEIB engagement and professional development opportunities for the College as a whole, including and beyond Dr. Kumashiro's workshops for faculty and staff. At the conclusion of the endowed chair appointment, a College of Education DEIB Resource Portal was created to document the College's work and support future DEIB work and faculty professional development in the College. The DEIB Resource Portal developed by the endowed chair was made available to all COE members, and one other University division at their request. Faculty and staff continued to utilize and contribute to the electronic resource portal/hub to ensure ongoing support for continued development and professional growth, which we viewed as essential to our collective commitment to

continue our work at all levels—individual, program, department, college and university.

At the end of the endowed chair term and our focused time with Dr. Kumashiro, to determine key learnings and next phases of the work, we asked staff and faculty to anonymously respond to a survey to assess learning and progress toward the intended outcomes. Two questions included on the survey are provided below, with summaries of anonymous responses by faculty and staff.

SURVEY 2: What We Learned After Our Focused Time with Dr. Kumashiro and the EDJE Framework

What are some Important Take-aways, New Insights, Reaffirmed Ideas?

At the conclusion of our time with Dr. Kumashiro and the EDJE Framework, faculty and staff highlighted a strong sense of affirmation and renewed motivation, noting widespread support from colleagues and students for engaging deeply in JEDI work aligned with the justice-centered missions of both the university and the college. Many emphasized the importance of developing shared language and clear definitions of key JEDI terms to guide the conceptualization and operationalization of equity efforts in the college. Participants were particularly influenced by insights such as "naming the moment," understanding justice as an ongoing process, and recognizing the danger of simplistic notions of diversity and inclusion. Also evident in faculty/staff responses, there was broad recognition that meaningful progress requires questioning assumptions, engaging in authentic and sustained dialogue, and grounding personal reflection and action in structural change. Finally, survey responses expressed a commitment to moving forward together with intentionality and shared purpose— recognizing the complexities of JEDI work and acknowledging varied stages of learning among the faculty and staff community.

What are some Wonderings and/or Lingering Questions for you?

Overall, responses indicated a range of lingering questions related to how the college would be able to move from shared learning to sustained, accountable action. Many faculty and staff wondered how to engage colleagues and students who are hesitant about JEDI/DEI work and how to rebuild trust and community after past harms and disruptions in the college's equity-focused work. Faculty and staff wondered about ways to ensure that JEDI/DEI efforts are transparent, well-resourced, and institutionally supported. Respondents shared other remaining questions related to managing the complexities of action-oriented equity work across multiple domains simultaneously—policies, curriculum, capacity building, and leadership—as well as how to navigate resistance, create structures for accountability, and ensure the work remains sustainable. Several faculty and staff also shared remaining questions about practical next steps, including the role of affinity groups, the need for designated resources, and how individuals in different roles (for example, non-student facing roles such as fundraising) can meaningfully contribute to advancing JEDI across the college.

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assessing outcomes and gauging overall progress toward our goals at the conclusion of the College's focused time with Dr. Kevin Kumashiro and the EDJE Framework, Dr. Kumashiro provided a set of recommendations to sustain and advance DEIB work in the College of Education (COE).

Dr. Kumashiro's Six Recommendations to Sustain and Advance DEIB Work in the College of Education

A key recommendation was that the COE's next steps to advance justice and equity should be focused on building institutional capacity to continue the collective work related to Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (JEDI). The six recommendations include:

Increase Opportunities for DEI Engagement and Professional Development.

Affirmed in the staff/faculty survey responses, it is important to provide numerous and varied DEI engagement and professional development opportunities throughout the year for COE members, including students, alumni, and community partners. This might include presentations from outsiders, sharing from insiders, DEI-focused discussions, reflection opportunities, arts, etc.

Establish Clear Leadership for Facilitation of DEI Work and Ensure Support for the People Doing this Work (Deans/Associate Deans, Endowed Chair, Department Chairs, other Leaders in the COE).

This includes, but is not limited to, professional development and financial support such as stipends for individuals taking on heavy DEI leadership roles. DEI work cannot fall on the same individuals, in addition to their regular workloads, year after year. There must be clear leadership and resources for facilitation of this critical work. Individuals in the COE taking on a leadership role to advance the COE's strategic DEI initiatives/goals must have this work reflected in their workload at a minimum. It is vitally important that DEI leadership is built into the workload of COE member(s) leading the work in the College. Additional compensation is appropriate beyond workload.

Distribution of DEI Work and Designated Time to Advance DEI as a Demonstration of Leadership's Commitment

DEI work must be the charge of various COE committees. It's important that the work is not viewed as the sole responsibility of a single individual or one group, such as the COE's Equity and Inclusion Working Group. It is important to establish that the work belongs to all members of the College, and it doesn't rest with one individual or entity. The COE should review the charge of all committees and consider changes where appropriate to align with strategic goals and DEI commitments. Academic year planning should include designated and consistent time devoted to advancing DEI work in the College. This includes regularly scheduled time in leadership meetings and college-wide meetings. The designated time should be devoted to the COE's collective, ongoing DEI work (strategic initiatives, goals, etc.). Finally, there must be leadership accountability plan that includes metrics, regular reporting, and a plan to distribute/share reports with COE and University leadership.

Adoption of an Equity Framework to Guide the College's DEI Work

It is important to identify, adopt and utilize a framework to avoid conceptually restarting the conversation each time/at different stages of the work and to avoid narrowly focusing on only one or two aspects of the College. The COE might consider the equity framework, EDJE Framework (2019), introduced by Dr. Kevin Kumashiro, our external DEI consultant. The framework was developed by College of Education Deans to advance justice and equity in Colleges of Education. One advantage of EDJE is that part of the framework can apply to every part of the COE (admissions, curriculum work, etc.). Therefore, there is flexibility allowing the College to adopt select portions or aspects of the EDJE framework, for example, "Governance and Finance" or "Teaching and Learning." There are many frameworks to consider, beyond the EDJE

Framework. During the next phases of work, the COE should consider a commitment to a framework(s) to guide and advance DEI work in the College.

Focused Professional Development for a Smaller Group of Emerging DEI Leaders in the College of Education.

Consider a multisession institute for a smaller group of staff/faculty to support their continued development and grow DEI leadership in the COE and SU. This additional support structure can be offered parallel to various DEI professional development opportunities/sessions for all members of the COE.

Provide a Permanent Budget Allocation to Advance DEI and Ensure Work is Sustained.

Financial resources to support DEI in the College should be devoted to people and programming. Course releases and stipends must be provided to individuals facilitating DEI work in the COE and/or serving in leadership roles to advance DEI. Resources for programming include funds for DEI initiatives, speakers, professional development resources etc. During the consultation period, the endowed chair was provided resources to support DEI work in the College. This funding provided $20,000 for DEI programming, four course releases, a graduate assistant, and a $14,600.00 stipend for the endowed chair leadership of DEI work in the COE. The current recommendation is to continue the level of funding.

Four Years Later, Where Are We? Is the College Justice-Centered, Or Still Becoming?

The College is still on the path to becoming more justice-centered. Claiming that we have "arrived" runs counter to the very spirit of the work. When the College concluded our financially resourced and intentional year of equity-focused work with Dr. Kumashiro and the EDJE

Framework, we still had much work ahead. However, we achieved our goals to have a shared language and an agreed upon justice framework to continue advancing equity in our College and beyond. In addition to shared language and a justice framework, we learned and practiced ways to make our justice commitments, and the work, visible and actionable. Finally, and maybe most important in terms of sustainability, the College has been able to act on the majority of Dr. Kumashiro's recommendations to advance and sustain our DEIB work. This includes a permanent DEIB leadership role, framework adoption, and ongoing professional development for staff, faculty, students and other community members.

Conclusion

This paper offers considerations and strategies for advancing justice in Colleges of Education and building systems of support for women of color on the path to leadership in the academy. Intentional work with the EDJE Framework (2019) and consultation with Dr. Kevin Kumashiro over a period of time allowed one College of Education to create shared language and a structure to implement equity-focused initiatives aligned with university-level commitments to promote inclusive excellence. The EDJE Framework was particularly useful because it outlines clear priority areas and essential questions grouped into four categories: (A) Governance and Finance, (B) Teaching and Learning, (C) Faculty and Staff, and (D) Partnerships and Public Impact. The College of Education was able to survey and respond to faculty and staff interest areas and customize meaningful professional development linked to key priority areas within the EDJE Framework. Faculty and staff survey data indicates positive perceptions of progress toward college-wide goals and capacity building to support future and. ongoing work.

This paper also offers important considerations for institutions committed to

diversifying leadership and advancing equity throughout the academy. Similar to the College-level work that is described in this paper, institutions must create structures to ensure we continue to advance equity and justice. One approach is to center the voices and experiences of Black, Latinx, Indigenous and other minoritized members of the campus community. Higher education institutions, especially during this era of anti-DEI, must continue to build coalitions, share and collectively develop frameworks and action plans for maintaining and strengthening equity and justice on our campuses. Especially now, institutions must continue to build capacity for diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) and they must ensure strong leadership to support DEIB integration in individual colleges, and across every aspect of campus life.

A Final Personal Reflection – What A Weathered BLM Sign Reminded Me Of

As a Black professor of education writing about advancing equity and justice-centered leadership in higher education, quite naturally, I continually reflect on my own experiences navigating and sustaining myself within an inherently inequitable and oppressive system. The barriers to tenure and professional advancement Black women, and other women of color, experience in the academy is well documented in the literature, and persistence requires navigating a range of daily challenges on multiple levels, to say the least. Many of us enter the academy with deep commitments to justice across various academic disciplines, and we remain—surviving and thriving—despite the storms, and the subsequent weathering over time. I often think about my almost 30 years as a Black professor in the academy. Recently, I came to think of my faculty journey as a weathered one, but one that endures. I came to this on a morning walk in my neighborhood in South Seattle.

I live in a historically diverse, but now predominately White, area of Seattle where my family is one of two Black families who have owned their homes in the neighborhood for two decades or more. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there were Black Lives Matter (BLM) signs in every yard, windowsill, or prominently displayed on the front porch. Over the last five years, on my daily morning walks throughout the neighborhood, I have noticed the dwindling signs—swift upheaval or slow removal over time. Exactly five years later, one lonely sign remains. The home with the remaining BLM sign belongs to a friendly middle-aged couple. They own a very nice home in my neighborhood, a home with a coveted water view. I pass their home every day on my early morning walk, and they wave to me from the window. Since 2020 their BLM sign has been firmly adhered to their front door, weathered by the changing seasons and relentless Seattle rain, but their solidarity sign is still there.

On days I am not preoccupied with thoughts about work, I let my mind wander on my early morning walk. On a recent mind-wandering morning stroll, I thought about the ways in which the one remaining BLM sign—a weathered gesture of solidarity—reflects certain portions of my faculty journey and my reluctant path to leadership. I have no doubt about what has sustained me. I have been able to persist by remaining proximate to steadfast, equity-focused colleagues and remaining deeply connected to justice-centered work, no matter how weathered, battered and worn the path and people become over time. We stand firm and do not waver in our commitments to freedom, liberation and justice—in education spaces and beyond, even in places that don't love us (Cooper, 2018), in places that systematically work to keep us in the storm. We see each other, light pathways for each other and stand in solidarity. Together, we continue to press toward the mark like our ancestors before us, and all of those who will press on long after our work is done.

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Creating Access and Opportunity: How Mid-Level Academic Leaders and Their Campus Partners Implement and Support Innovative Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Recruitment

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Abstract

This paper explores how Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans can strategically support and implement access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives in research universities. Drawing on case studies from the University of Michigan, Western Michigan University, and the University of Kentucky, the analysis highlights how leaders can use theory-based approaches grounded in Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital to expand access and foster belonging for historically minoritized students. Key institutional strategies include innovative approaches to campus visits, mentorship, high school partnerships, and leadership coordination across academic units. The paper emphasizes the essential role of mid-level leaders in aligning DEI efforts with academic missions, sustaining outreach networks, and embedding culturally responsive practices across units. Together, these cases offer a scalable and sustainable framework that institutionalizes equity beyond surface-level recruiting initiatives—demonstrating how leadership at all levels can build infrastructure that transforms access into long-term student opportunity.

Despite decades of efforts to promote diversity, research-intensive universities continue to struggle with the persistent underrepresentation of minoritized students—particularly those from rural, urban, and under-resourced high schools (Howard, 2024). This challenge is not new, but it remains among the most urgent in higher education today. Historically, efforts have focused on isolated diversity initiatives rather than reimagining recruitment through the lens of equity, innovation, and sustained opportunity (Vasquez Heilig, Reddick, Hamilton, & Dietz, 2011; Vasquez Heilig, Dietz, & Volonnino, 2011). Yet the transformative potential of recruitment strategies that are intentionally designed to expand access and promote educational opportunity cannot be overstated. By fundamentally rethinking how and where we recruit, and by centering the voices and aspirations of underrepresented students,

institutions can begin to disrupt the structural barriers that have long perpetuated exclusion (Turner, 1994).

As Gasman (2016) observed, racial inequities in higher education are rooted in five core institutional failures: lack of accountability, exclusionary admissions practices, insufficient financial support, inadequate recruitment and retention efforts, and unwelcoming campus climates. Each of these dimensions intersects directly with how universities approach—or fail to approach—equitable recruitment. Innovative recruitment must therefore go beyond outreach. It must involve deep partnerships with K–12 systems, community organizations, and families to ensure that students from historically marginalized communities are not only invited to the university table but positioned to thrive when they arrive.

These barriers to access start long before the college admissions process. Students from urban and rural communities often lack equitable opportunities for rigorous academic preparation, leadership development, and college readiness support (Khalifa, 2018; Vasquez Heilig, Williams, & Jez, 2010). In this context, traditional recruitment strategies often miss the mark, failing to connect with students' lived experiences or to counteract the cumulative effects of systemic disadvantage. Access and opportunity-driven recruitment, by contrast, begins with a recognition of these disparities and seeks to build inclusive pipelines that cultivate talent and ambition over time.

Critically, this work requires rejecting a one-size-fits-all model. As Strayhorn (2018) and Sáenz & Ponjuan (2008) emphasized, minoritized students often encounter campus climates that undermine belonging and persistence. Access-oriented recruitment must therefore be paired with strategies that build community, affirm identity, and invest in the holistic development of students. In this way, recruitment becomes the foundation of a larger institutional ecosystem of success, where students are not only admitted, but are supported, mentored, and empowered to thrive.

While many universities have adopted diversity language in mission statements or strategic plans, Vasquez Heilig et al. (2019) argue that far too often, these gestures are performative. Innovation in recruitment means moving beyond numbers toward building authentic, reciprocal relationships with communities that have historically been excluded. It means investing in culturally responsive programming, multilingual outreach, and partnerships that are grounded in mutual trust. Hurtado and Carter (1997) remind us that inclusion cannot be reduced to representation alone; true opportunity requires the intentional creation of environments where students feel a strong sense of belonging, visibility, and purpose.

Ultimately, access- and opportunity-oriented recruitment is not a peripheral activity—it is central to fulfilling the mission of higher education in a diverse democracy. When recruitment is viewed as a form of justice work, and when institutions commit to innovative approaches rooted in equity, the result is not just increased enrollment and more diverse campuses, but stronger, more resilient academic communities. Addressing underrepresentation demands bold, systemic change—and that change begins with reimagining who we recruit, how we recruit them, and what we offer once they arrive.

Access and Opportunity-Driven Recruitment Initiatives: The Role of Mid-Level Academic Leadership

In response to entrenched inequities in higher education, academic leaders must serve as central drivers of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by advancing recruitment strategies that foreground access and opportunity. Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans (ADs) are often on the forefront of this work—developing and implementing outreach programs, mentorship initiatives, and college-level policy shifts that center the needs and strengths of minoritized students (Achebe et al., 2021; Bowen et al., 2024; Esparza et al., 2024; Floyd & Preston, 2018). Working within the constraints of

institutional bureaucracy, these mid-level leaders navigate complex governance structures to move access- and opportunity-driven DEI efforts from aspiration to action (Mueses & LePeau, 2019; Williams, 2013).

This paper analyzes how mid-level academic leaders, in collaboration with campus partners, implement access- and opportunity-driven recruitment strategies that build social and cultural capital to expand educational opportunity. Drawing on case studies from the University of Michigan (U-M), Western Michigan University (WMU), and the University of Kentucky (UK), we demonstrate how sustained engagement by ADs and their campus partners has resulted in access- and opportunity-focused interventions that are both innovative and institutionally embedded. At U-M, mentorship and outreach programs that often began at the unit level have been scaled into university-wide recruitment and retention policies. WMU illustrates how targeted investments in social capital–building campus visits can transform the role of academic leaders in access- and opportunity-focused innovation. At UK, digital engagement strategies have reimagined recruitment through culturally resonant storytelling and online mentorship, reinforcing the role of communication as a tool for institutional inclusion.

Cultural and Social Capital as a Framework for Access- and Opportunity-Driven Recruiting

A central theme of this paper is the pivotal role that cultural and social capital theory can play in shaping access- and opportunity-driven recruitment efforts. ADs and other mid-level academic leaders are often deeply involved in student-facing initiatives— such as creating affinity spaces, mentoring minoritized students, and developing pipeline programs that connect historically excluded communities to higher education. The challenge, however, lies not only in sustaining DEI programs but in designing, scaling, and institutionalizing them so they

become embedded within the university's culture and governance. Without intentional structures and support, DEI efforts risk becoming fragile— overly reliant on individual champions and vulnerable to leadership turnover or shifting institutional priorities. Framing recruitment through cultural and social capital offers a pathway to ensure that equity work endures as a core institutional commitment, rather than an episodic intervention. One of the key difficulties is the resistance to access- and opportunity-driven initiatives that leaders often face in academic leadership administration. While ADs and deans may operate within specific colleges that are supportive of their equity efforts, in many universities provosts and vice provosts must engage with broader institutional and political landscapes that may be less receptive. Increasingly, DEI efforts are also being scrutinized or even actively opposed by external forces, including presidents, state legislatures, and governing boards, many of whom challenge the legitimacy of diversity-focused programming. In this era, leaders who successfully implement access- and opportunity-driven commitments do so by reframing DEI as essential to institutional thriving—emphasizing its impact on student success, faculty recruitment, research innovation, academic excellence, and overall university competitiveness and impact.

The Future of DEI Leadership in Higher Education

ADs are the future of DEI in higher education. Positioned at the intersection of faculty, students, and administration, not only are they uniquely positioned to translate DEI commitments into tangible, institution-wide change but they are also in the pipeline to be future deans, provosts, and presidents. As mid-level academic leaders, they develop and implement targeted access and opportunity initiatives, advocate for minoritized students, and create policies that expand access and opportunity. However, their influence does not stop at their respective units—ADs are often the architects of long-term DEI strategies that

shape the trajectory of an institution's equity work. A powerful example of this is the UK College of Education, which saw a significant surge in DEI-related results following the dean's appointment of its inaugural Associate Dean for Inclusion & Internationalization (ADII)—a strategic decision made under the leadership of the college's former dean, who is also a co-author of this paper. This appointment was not merely symbolic; it restructured the college's approach to DEI, further embedding equity work into faculty hiring, student recruitment, and international collaboration. This shift illustrates how ADs serve as force multipliers, creating frameworks that can persist.

By framing DEI work through the lens of leadership pipelines and theory-based change, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on how access and opportunity-oriented academic leaders navigate institutional structures, advocate for transformative change, and build sustainable models of equity in higher education. It highlights the specific strategies that leaders utilized for innovation. Ultimately, these case studies provide key takeaways for academic leaders, offering insights into how they can innovate access- and opportunity-driven commitments into institutional strategy and policy. As universities continue to face mounting challenges— including political pressures, funding constraints, and shifting public attitudes toward diversity— the role of academic leaders will be more critical than ever. The future of inclusive excellence in higher education depends not just on the expansion of access and opportunity initiatives, but on the ability of leaders to embed equity into the core of institutional governance at the college and the institutional level, ensuring that DEI work is not just sustained, but accelerated, at every level of leadership.

Theoretical Framework

The ability for ADs to sustain and expand access and opportunity initiatives is contingent on their interest, experience, and capacity to conceptualize and mobilize social and cultural

capital within institutional structures drawn from academic training and professional development opportunities (e.g. consultants, mentors, trainings). Leadership pipelines in higher education require more than administrative authority—they necessitate a commitment to understanding of how power, networks, and cultural knowledge shape access, influence, and sustainability within higher education institutions. This paper draws on social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988) and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986) to analyze how mid-level academic leaders can implement and support access- and opportunity-driven strategies grounded in theoretical frameworks. By applying these perspectives to our cases, we demonstrate how social and cultural capital frame DEI as research-based, critical mechanisms for student access and opportunity at the college and institutional level. Through case studies from three research-intensive institutions, we examine how academic leaders can use bridging social capital, linking social capital, and cultural capital to support minoritized students and institutionalize equity.

Defining Social and Cultural Capital in Higher Education Leadership

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital extends beyond economic resources, encompassing forms of social power that determine an individual's ability to navigate and succeed within structured environments such as universities (Bourdieu, 1977). For historically minoritized students— and by extension, the academic leaders advocating for them—social and cultural capital mediate access to institutional resources, networks, and pathways for success. Social Capital refers to the advantages gained through relationships, networks, and institutional connections. It exists in two primary forms:

- *Bridging Social Capital* facilitates relationships beyond one's immediate community, enabling students to access mentors, sponsors, and institutional

allies who provide academic and professional guidance (Putnam, 2000).

- *Linking Social Capital* refers to connections between individuals and institutional power structures, ensuring that students have access to decision-makers, university policies, and key institutional resources (Woolcock, 2011).

Cultural Capital includes the knowledge, behaviors, and institutional fluency necessary to navigate higher education (Bourdieu, 1986). This capital is particularly significant for minoritized students. It includes:

- *Embodied Cultural Capital*, or the implicit knowledge required to perform academic and professional roles within predominantly white institutions (Bourdieu, 1986).
- *Institutionalized Cultural Capital*, referring to credentials, honors, and recognized expertise that confer legitimacy within university structures (Bourdieu, 1986).

By analyzing and framing recruiting strategies through the framework of social and cultural capital, this paper bridges theories of educational equity and organizational change for the improvement of student access and opportunity. It also demonstrates how ADs and their campus partners, equipped with an understanding of social and cultural capital, can extend equity efforts beyond college-level interventions, driving access- and opportunity-driven transformations within higher education institutions.

Building Social and Cultural Capital Through Mentorship and Campus Visits

One of the most effective applications of social and cultural capital theory in DEI leadership is the development of mentorship programs and campus visits as structured interventions for historically minoritized students (Reddick & Vasquez Heilig, 2011). These access and opportunity initiatives function as capital-building

mechanisms, equipping students with critical institutional knowledge, relational networks, and embedded social resources that extend beyond immediate recruitment efforts. For example, mentorship and ambassador programs strategically cultivate bridging and linking social capital by pairing prospective students with university students, faculty, and administrative leaders (e.g. ADs) who serve as knowledge brokers and institutional navigators. These relationships mitigate the navigational challenges that minoritized students can encounter in research-intensive universities.

Additionally, campus visits reinforce cultural capital acquisition by providing students with exposure to the rituals, discourses, and expectations of higher education, an essential process for fostering a sense of belonging and reducing cultural alienation at PWIs. Working with recruiters and marketing teams, ADs can play important roles in virtual and in-person campus visits. Through guided interactions with faculty, structured peer mentorship, and early access to university resources, these initiatives operationalize cultural capital as student access and opportunity strategy rather than a passive byproduct.

Social and Cultural Capital in Culturally Affirming Recruitment Models

Beyond individual mentorship and recruitment efforts, universities have leveraged culturally responsive engagement strategies to embed DEI into their institutional fabric. One example is socially and culturally resonant recruitment programming, which integrates students' existing cultural identities into their university experience, offering cultural capital acquisition while fostering bridging social capital among minoritized students. Culturally embedded recruitment strategies—such as university-hosted music, arts, and community-based events for historically marginalized students—transform recruitment into a social capital interaction with cultural wealth rather than a transactional admissions effort. These

programs acknowledge that minoritized students as valued participants in the institutional culture. ADs can lead in this work by fostering cultural capital through programming focused on artistic expression, social identity affirmation, and community-building, these access and opportunity initiatives destabilize exclusionary university norms, reinforcing student agency, institutional belonging, and long-term retention.

Digital Engagement as a Mechanism for Social and Cultural Capital Expansion

In the digital age, social capital is no longer confined to in-person networks. Academic leaders must increasingly utilize technology-driven engagement strategies to expand institutional access, facilitate pre-matriculation socialization, and connect students with digital mentorship ecosystems. By leveraging interactive, student-centered storytelling on social media platforms, universities have created virtual social capital-building spaces, where prospective students can form bridging social capital connections with current students, alumni, academic leaders and faculty before ever setting foot on campus. These digital spaces also cultivate cultural capital by demystifying institutional expectations, equipping students with navigational knowledge that historically privileged students often acquire informally. Social media storytelling, particularly through student-led content, interactive Q&As, and digital ambassador programs, provides minoritized students with an early introduction to the social norms, academic expectations, and institutional structures that shape their success in higher education. By positioning social media as an equity tool, ADs can utilize and develop their expertise to engage in transforming digital engagement from a marketing strategy into a theoretical intervention for educational access. This shift requires academic leaders to cultivate digital fluency and conceptualize online presence. When deployed intentionally, these practices help all students enter college with greater confidence, insight, and connection.

Conceptualizing Sustainable DEI Leadership: Social and Cultural Capital as Institutional Strategy

ADs ability to embed social and cultural capital frameworks that they've implemented into governance and financial structures will influence whether DEI efforts remain episodic or systemic. Bridging capital frameworks will continue to be essential in framing and fostering innovations in mentorship networks, cross-institutional collaborations, and policy coalitions that sustain DEI work. While, linking social capital must be intentionally cultivated to ensure that DEI efforts are embedded in institutional policies and funding structures, mitigating the risks of leadership turnover and political pushback. Additionally, cultural capital interaction with cultural wealth would be a foundational strategy in approaches to help minoritized students understand the hidden curriculum of academia, increasing academic success, student diversity and retention. As higher education faces increasing political, demographic, and financial pressures, savvy ADs and their campus partners must help universities must move beyond surface-level access and opportunity commitments toward conceptualizing and engaging structural, theory-based capital models of institutional transformation. The application of social and cultural capital theory to DEI leadership offers a roadmap for ensuring that equity remains a systemic imperative rather than a temporary, leadership-dependent initiative.

Methodology: A Descriptive Case Study Approach

This paper employs a descriptive multiple-case study methodology to examine how mid-level academic leaders— specifically ADs— can advance and institutionalize recruitment initiatives focused on access and opportunity with campus partners. Consistent with Yin's (2018) approach to case study design, this method allows for in-depth exploration of real-world leadership practices in their institutional contexts, with particular attention to organizational conditions

that enable the long-term sustainability of equity work.

By focusing on three public research-intensive universities, this study investigates how access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives are embedded into institutional strategy. The case study approach enables both in-depth within-case analysis and cross-case synthesis, generating generalizable insights about equity-centered strategies. The three selected universities—U-M, WMU, and UK—were chosen based on three primary criteria: a demonstrated history of DEI innovation led by mid-level academic leaders; the authors' direct experience engaging with ADs at these institutions; and documented cases of successfully implemented recruitment initiatives focused on access and opportunity. These cases reflect diverse institutional profiles—ranging from flagship to regional public universities—and illustrate the adaptive strategies mid-level leaders employed to embed equity-driven practices. This study is guided by the central research question: How do mid-level academic leaders implement and support access- and opportunity-driven recruitment initiatives at public research universities?

To address this question, the study employs a case study approach to explore how access- and opportunity-focused recruiting initiatives were implemented across institutional contexts. Key areas of analysis include: the implementation processes and specific interventions; the nature of ADs and other stakeholder and community engagement in advancing DEI efforts; the institutional support structures—such as administrative partnerships and collaborative mechanisms; and a framing of social and cultural capital frameworks in recruitment strategies. This study is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of institutional artifacts and publicly available documentation. Sources include websites, internal strategic plans, DEI progress reports, and program evaluations; detailed descriptions of access and opportunity focused recruiting initiatives from the UM's Center for Educational Outreach (CEO), WMU's Office of

the Provost, and the UK's College of Education's Office of the Dean; as well as social media content, digital storytelling materials, and university-sponsored media campaigns. Additionally, archived speeches, policy statements, and campus newsletters were reviewed to contextualize the evolution and institutionalization of DEI efforts across the three case study sites. In this paper, the descriptive multiple-case study methodology centers access- and opportunity-driven recruiting practices and highlights how DEI efforts can be scaled through organizational resilience, structural embedding, and sustained community collaboration.

Case Studies in Advancing Equity at Research-Intensive Universities

University of Michigan(U-M): Leveraging Outreach Initiatives to Recruit and Empower Minoritized Students

At the University of Michigan, CEO has led access- and opportunity-driven initiatives that inherently build social and cultural capital among minoritized students from urban high schools, equipping them with the resources, networks, and knowledge needed to succeed in higher education. These efforts can be framed by Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital, which extends beyond economic resources to include forms of social power that mediate access to institutional structures and opportunities. For minoritized students, the accumulation of bridging social capital, linking social capital, and cultural capital is essential for navigating the academic environment and persisting through college.

Higher education institutions often focus on expanding access for minoritized students, but access alone is not sufficient to ensure long-term success. Social capital—the networks, relationships, and institutional linkages that facilitate upward mobility—plays a critical role in supporting student retention and achievement. Cultural capital, which encompasses the knowledge and behaviors used to navigate

academic spaces, is equally important, particularly for students who lack familiarity with institutional norms and expectations. U-M's CEO initiatives systematically address these access and opportunity challenges by equipping students with the social and cultural fluency required to access higher education

Expanding Social Capital Through the Campus Visits Program

U-M's flagship initiative, the Campus Visits Program, serves as a structured intervention designed to build students' social capital by expanding their networks and increasing access to institutional resources across the state (CEO, n.d-b). Many students from underserved communities have limited exposure to college environments before they apply, making the transition into higher education particularly challenging. Early and intentional exposure to university life is a crucial factor in shaping students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy in higher education (Goldschneider, 2024).

Rather than serving as a generic recruitment tool, U-M's Campus Visits Program integrates culturally meaningful experiences that foster belonging, confidence, and academic preparedness. Through these visits, students from urban high schools engage with current U-M students, faculty, and staff who share similar backgrounds and experiences. These interactions facilitate bridging social capital by extending students' networks beyond their immediate communities, providing them with potential mentors, role models, and institutional allies who offer academic and professional guidance. The College Access and Success Ambassadors (CASA) play a crucial role in this process by demystifying the college experience and offering firsthand insights into university life (CEO, n.d-a).

Beyond peer networks, the Campus Visits Program cultivates linking social capital by providing students with direct access to university representatives, faculty, and institutional resources. These visits include information sessions with academic advising, financial aid specialists, and student organization

leaders, ensuring that students develop early exposure to institutional power structures that will support their transition into higher education. This access is particularly critical for first-generation students, who benefit from knowledge of how to navigate university systems efficiently. Without intentional efforts to foster linking social capital, it is more difficult for students to connect to the resources necessary for academic success.

Developing Cultural Capital for Higher Education Navigation

The Campus Visits Program also functions as a cultural capital-building intervention, providing students with early exposure to the norms, values, and expectations of higher education. Experiences such as the A-MAIZE-ING Race, a social justice-themed scavenger hunt highlighting U-M's legacy of activism, immerse students in the university's history and culture (Residence Halls Association, n.d.). These activities help students navigate the institutional landscape with confidence, equipping them with the embodied cultural capital necessary for success in a PWI. Additionally, workshops on the college application process, financial aid, and academic success strategies provide students with institutionalized cultural capital, ensuring they understand credentialing processes, expectations for faculty engagement, and pathways for advancement in higher education.

Since 2018, U-M's CEO has hosted 255 campus visits, serving 7,655 students—83% of whom participated in in-person programming. Internal evaluations at the University of Michigan have emphasized that early exposure to college environments during the recruitment process is critical for fostering a sense of belonging and improving student retention. U-M's approach demonstrates that social and cultural capital-building efforts must be intentional, sustained, and structurally embedded within recruitment strategies to ensure that students do not just access higher education but are positioned for long-term success.

Mentorship as a Mechanism for Sustained Social and Cultural Capital

U-M's mentorship programs complement the Campus Visits Program by offering sustained support to prospective students. While a one-time campus visit can initiate social and cultural capital development, early mentorship programs are critical for maintaining and expanding these networks over time. This approach directly cultivates bridging and linking social capital, ensuring that students build relationships with peers, university professionals, and institutional figures who can guide them to enrollment and throughout their academic careers. By pairing high school students with current U-M student mentors, the university extends access to academic and social networks that might otherwise be difficult to obtain for secondary students. Mentors serve as navigators of university culture, providing advice on selecting courses, engaging with faculty, and managing the social pressures of college life.

Beyond peer connections, mentorship enhances linking social capital by integrating students into institutional structures. Through mentor-facilitated introductions to financial aid offices, advising centers, and student organizations, students establish vital connections that support long-term success. These relationships also strengthen prospective students' cultural capital by helping them understand the implicit rules of college life—expectations around classroom participation, faculty interaction, and time management.

Expanding Social and Cultural Capital Beyond Campus: High School Partnerships

U-M's commitment to capital-building extends beyond campus through high school partnerships that create structured pipelines for minoritized students. The Michigan College Advising Corps (MCAC) place recent U-M graduates in 16 high schools to provide college advising and readiness support (CEO, n.d-c). These access and opportunity initiatives mirror CEO's mission by expanding access to both informational and relational capital. Since 2015, MCAC has supported over 14,905 high school seniors, with more than 250 enrolling at U-M—evidence of the long-term impact of outreach embedded directly in students' home communities.

Associate Deans and the Expansion of Equity Leadership

The role of mid-level academic leaders—particularly associate deans—has become crucial in institutionalizing CEO's mission across U-M's colleges and schools. These leaders serve as strategic partners, ensuring that access and opportunity initiatives are woven into undergraduate education structures. In the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education leads the "Intent to Attend" program, which uses personalized coaching and immersive tools to foster early college-going identities and deepen students' bridging and linking social capital—objectives that directly parallel the Campus Visits Program (Literature, Science & Arts, n.d.).

In the School of Kinesiology, mid-level leaders have supported faculty in designing culturally responsive youth programming and equitable pedagogical practices that mirror CEO's goals (School of Kinesiology, n.d.). Likewise, in the Ross School of Business, associate deans have advanced inclusive summer pipeline programs that reinforce the mentorship model and prepare students for elite academic environments. (Stephen M. Ross School of Business, n.d.). Meanwhile, the College of Engineering's Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education has championed transition programs for transfer students—many of whom also participate in CEO outreach (College of Engineering, n.d.). These leadership efforts reflect a wider, intentional network: associate deans, CEO, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education are building a cross-campus community of practice. This alignment ensures that equity leadership is not

isolated but embedded, creating a shared architecture that connects student needs to systemic transformation.

In short, U-M's associate deans have become critical equity multipliers, helping to weave CEO's capital-building strategies into the operational core of academic life. Their efforts reveal what is possible when outreach is not treated as a peripheral engagement strategy but as a foundational philosophy, co-owned across levels of academic leadership on campus. Despite recent political events related to the Trump Administration's opposition to DEI, this alignment has reinforced the university's continuing vision: that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not simply moral imperatives—they are operational practices rooted in student success and institutional transformation.

Framing Theory in Access- and Opportunity-Driven Innovations for Recruitment Initiatives at U-M

U-M's access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives exemplify how higher education institutions can systematically leverage social and cultural capital theories to advance DEI goals. These programs increase access to higher education for minoritized students while fostering the networks, institutional linkages, and cultural competencies necessary for long-term success. These findings align with Bourdieu's framework of capital, reinforcing the idea that access to higher education is not merely about admissions but about equipping students with the social power necessary to persist and succeed. U-M's outreach and mentorship efforts represent a replicable, theory-based model for moving beyond surface-level access and opportunity initiatives toward systemic, capital-building interventions. Social and cultural capital are not abstract concepts; they are tangible mechanisms that shape educational opportunity. U-M's recruiting strategy illustrates that when institutions proactively invest in capital-building approaches, they create pathways for students.

The University of Kentucky (UK): Building Digital Bridges—Recruiting Minoritized Students Through Social Media

The UK has strategically employed social media as a tool to build both social and cultural capital among prospective minoritized students, particularly those from urban high schools. Recognizing that many of these students actively engage with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and X, UK has developed a comprehensive digital engagement strategy that extends beyond conventional marketing. (College of Education, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e, n.d.-f). Rather than merely disseminating information, UK's approach fosters meaningful connections, provides access to institutional resources, and cultivates a sense of belonging long before students formally enroll. This approach directly addresses the structural barriers that minoritized students often encounter during the transition to higher education while simultaneously equipping them with the social and cultural capital necessary for long-term success.

UK's social media initiatives align with Bourdieu's theory of capital—which extends beyond economic resources to encompass the accumulation of social power through relationships, institutional connections, and cultural fluency—and are developed collaboratively by the Associate Dean for Inclusion and Internationalization (ADII) and communications staff to advance access- and opportunity-driven engagement for minoritized students. Social capital plays a central role in framing this approach, offering individuals access to networks and relationships that facilitate mobility within structured environments such as universities. UK's social media outreach builds both bridging and linking social capital, allowing minoritized students to establish relationships with peers, mentors, and institutional figures, such as the ADII, serve as critical sources of support. Simultaneously, UK's approach to digital storytelling enhances cultural capital by

providing students with the implicit knowledge, behaviors, and skills necessary to navigate the academic and social expectations of a PWI.

Expanding Social Networks Through Digital Engagement

A defining feature of UK's social media strategy is its ability to cultivate bridging social capital by extending students' networks beyond their immediate communities. Many prospective minoritized students, particularly those from under-resourced high schools, need exposure to individuals who can offer firsthand insights into the university experience. UK addresses this gap through student takeovers, which provide an unfiltered perspective on campus life by allowing current minoritized students to control university social media accounts for a designated period. These takeovers feature real-time interactions in which prospective students can ask questions, express concerns, and receive personalized advice from those who have successfully navigated similar academic and social challenges. By facilitating direct engagement between prospective students and current students, these takeovers function as a mechanism for bridging social capital, helping students develop networks that will support them throughout their transition to higher education.

The College of Education Student Ambassadors under the auspices of the communication and marketing team, with input from the ADII, further contribute to this effort by serving as intermediaries between the university and prospective students (College of Education, n.d.-a). These ambassadors, who are current students, use social media to share their experiences, answer questions, and highlight academic and extracurricular opportunities available at UK. Their presence on digital platforms creates a less formal and more accessible space for prospective students to connect with individuals who have successfully navigated the university system. This engagement not only provides practical insights into college life but also fosters a sense of community that

extends beyond recruitment events and campus visits.

Beyond individual peer connections, UK's digital strategy enhances linking social capital by positioning social media as a bridge to institutional resources. Many minoritized students, particularly first-generation college applicants, may struggle to navigate complex university structures, such as financial aid systems, academic advising, and student support services. Through its social media presence, UK demystifies these processes by providing direct, easy-to-understand content on application deadlines, scholarship opportunities, and university resources. By offering students clear pathways to engage with university infrastructure, UK seeks to ensure that prospective students develop the linking social capital necessary to access the institutional knowledge and support systems that will be critical to their success.

Cultural Capital and the Role of Digital Storytelling

In addition to fostering social capital, UK's social media access- and opportunity-driven recruiting approach plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural capital—the knowledge, skills, and institutional fluency that students need to successfully navigate higher education. For many minoritized students, particularly those from urban and rural high schools, the transition to an R1 PWI presents cultural challenges that extend beyond academics. Institutional norms, classroom expectations, and campus social dynamics may feel unfamiliar or exclusionary, leading to imposter syndrome and feelings of isolation (Strayhorn, 2018). UK's digital storytelling strategy directly addresses this issue by providing prospective students with a framework for understanding the expectations of the university environment.

Student takeovers, ambassador profiles, and behind-the-scenes videos offer prospective students an inside look at the experiences of minoritized students at UK. These digital

narratives introduce students to the unwritten rules of academic engagement, including how to interact with faculty, access research opportunities, and integrate into student organizations. By showcasing real experiences, these social media interactions function as a mechanism for acquiring embodied cultural capital, ensuring that students enter the university with a foundational understanding of how to navigate its structures. This knowledge may be particularly valuable for first-generation students who may need guidance on the nuances of college life.

Beyond individual experiences, UK's social media presence actively highlights institutional resources that support cultural affirmation and belonging. In the current political climate where DEI initiatives have been subject to increased scrutiny, the communications team and the ADII have used digital engagement to showcase cultural centers, student organizations, and events designed to serve minoritized students. By doing so, UK signals to prospective students that their cultural identities will not only be acknowledged but celebrated on campus. This reinforcement of cultural capital is critical for retention, as students who see their backgrounds and experiences reflected in university spaces are more likely to persist and succeed (Hale, 2023; Cooper, 2024).

Access to College Knowledge Through Digital Platforms

UK's social media engagement also functions as a conduit for transmitting institutionalized cultural capital—formal knowledge about university processes that is often inaccessible to first-generation students. Many prospective students need consistent access to college counselors or family members who can guide them through the application and enrollment process. UK addresses this barrier by using social media to provide step-by-step guidance on critical topics such as financial aid applications, scholarship deadlines, and personal statement writing. By breaking down complex processes into digestible content,

UK ensures that prospective students have access to the knowledge necessary to successfully navigate the transition to college.

Supported by the ADII and communication team, the College of Education Student Ambassadors play a vital role in recruitment efforts, regularly participating in virtual events and social media Q&A sessions to share insights on academic programs, financial resources, and campus life. Their firsthand experiences make the information more relatable and accessible, reducing the intimidation factor often associated with applying to a university. Through this approach, UK transforms social media from a promotional tool into a substantive resource that fosters both social and cultural capital for minoritized students.

Framing Theory in Access- and Opportunity-Driven Innovations for Recruitment Initiatives at UK

UK's strategic use of social media as a tool fosters social and cultural capital among prospective minoritized students offers a replicable model for academic leaders seeking to improve diversity and inclusion through digital engagement. By cultivating bridging and linking social capital through digital engagement with current students, mentors, and institutional representatives, UK ensures that prospective students build networks that will support them throughout their transition to higher education. At the same time, by using digital storytelling to enhance cultural capital, UK provides students with the implicit knowledge and institutional fluency necessary to navigate an academic environment that may otherwise feel unfamiliar.

As DEI initiatives face increasing resistance in states like Kentucky, UK's approach underscores the importance of embedding access- and opportunity-driven recruiting efforts into institutional infrastructure in ways that extend beyond traditional recruitment strategies. By leveraging social media to provide students with access to networks, knowledge, and resources, the UK communications team with expertise and

support from the ADII demonstrate that digital engagement is not merely an auxiliary tool but a central mechanism for creating equitable pathways to higher education. In an era when universities must actively sustain DEI efforts amid growing political criticism and resistance in red states, the UK recruitment practices reflect a powerful application of social and cultural capital theory. These practices help ensure that minoritized students not seek to be admitted, but also equipped with the knowledge, networks, and resources needed to thrive. By meeting students where they are, on social media, and offering content that is authentic, engaging, and informative, UK has redefined the role of digital engagement in fostering access and opportunity in higher education. Through this work, the college is not only increasing access for minoritized students but also building the networks, institutional connections, and cultural competencies that will allow them to thrive.

Western Michigan University (WMU): Recruiting Minoritized Students Through Immersive and Affirming Campus Experiences

WMU has crafted student recruitment initiatives that intentionally enhance social and cultural capital among prospective students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. As part of a broader institutional commitment to equity, the Provost, who is also one of the authors of this paper, prioritized the hiring of the Inaugural Associate Provost of Equity-Centered Initiatives in Academic Affairs (APECIAA) to collaborate with colleges on embedding culturally affirming experiences into the recruitment process. This strategic move signaled a shift beyond traditional outreach models. The WMU approach has centered identity affirmation, community-building, and mentorship as critical elements influencing students' college decision-making and long-term academic success. Through access- and opportunity-driven initiatives like Unity Weekend, WMU has sought to foster bridging and linking social capital by

connecting students with mentors, peers, and college leaders (ADs and admissions staff) who can support their transition into higher education (Office of the Provost, n.d.). These interactions provide prospective students not only with early access to the breadth of campus resources but also with cultural capital, equipping them with the knowledge and behaviors necessary to navigate academic spaces. By creating opportunities to immerse students in the campus environment where their identities are valued, WMU has sought to create a recruitment model that reinforces belonging, confidence, and agency among minoritized students.

To enhance the planning and implementation of Unity Weekend, the APECIAA, through the Provost's Leadership Council, requested that each college appoint a designee to assist with coordination. This collaborative approach ensured that the initiative was embedded across academic units. ADs played a critical role in this effort, typically serving as their colleges' representatives and helping to design programming that connected directly with the academic and cultural interests of the visiting students. Their involvement helped bridge institutional planning with student-centered execution, ensuring that Unity Weekend was both logistically sound and supported by the college.

Unity Weekend: A Culturally Affirming Recruitment Model

Unity Weekend was intentionally designed to provide students with a culturally resonant introduction to university life. This initiative led by the APECIAA, a partnership between the President's Office, Provost's Office and the Office of Enrollment Management, ensured that students experienced the campus in ways that reflected and honored their backgrounds, strengthening their social networks while providing them with access to key institutional resources. Rather than simply showcasing the university, Unity Weekend provided students with opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences that made the prospect of college

feel both accessible and affirming. As part of the event, Detroit Renaissance High School's Marching Band was invited to perform at a Division I football game, an experience that not only highlighted students' musical talents but also reinforced WMU's commitment to recognizing and celebrating students' cultural and artistic expressions within the university setting. By integrating their performance ability into campus traditions, WMU provided students with embodied cultural capital, a sense of legitimacy and inclusion within the academic community that is too often out of reach for minoritized students at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2018).

In addition to the football game performance, students engaged in the Greek Unity Celebration, where they were introduced to African American and Latino Greek organizations on campus. These interactions exposed students to culturally specific community-building structures that extend beyond the classroom, reinforcing the importance of peer networks, alumni connections, and long-term mentorship opportunities in their educational journey. Witnessing the presence of Greek-letter organizations that have historically served as support systems for Black and Latino students in higher education provided prospective students with a tangible representation of how cultural solidarity and leadership pathways exist within university life.

The weekend also included engagement with student organizations that focus on cultural identity, service, and advocacy. Students connected with representatives from these organizations, who shared insights into how their groups foster a supportive environment for academic and social success. These exchanges helped Renaissance students visualize a college experience that aligns with and celebrates their cultural identities, allowing them to see WMU not just as a place where they can study, but as a place where they can thrive while maintaining and celebrating their cultural heritage.

Enhancing Social Capital Through Meaningful Institutional Connections

Unity Weekend was designed to expand students' social capital by fostering connections with university stakeholders who could serve as mentors, guides, and advocates throughout their college journey. This strategy aligns with Bourdieu's framework, which emphasizes that access to bridging and linking social capital is a crucial determinant of students' ability to persist and succeed in higher education. By bringing high school students into direct engagement with current WMU students, faculty, mid-level academic leaders, and community members, Unity Weekend allowed students to develop early networks of support that extend beyond their immediate high school environments. These relationships expose students to individuals who have successfully navigated similar experiences, offering them guidance, reassurance, and an expanded sense of what is possible in higher education.

Another key outcome of these interactions is the development of linking social capital—direct connections to university resources, faculty, and staff who hold influence within the institution. Many minoritized students need access to individuals in positions of institutional authority who can provide advocacy, guidance, and access to opportunities. By introducing students, their teachers, school leaders, and parents to campus connections during their recruitment process, WMU sought to ensure that these students entered college with an established network of support that would continue beyond their first year.

Cultural Capital and the Importance of Navigational Knowledge

For many minoritized students, understanding the unwritten rules of higher education is just as critical as academic preparedness. WMU's Unity Weekend was intentionally structured to equip students with the cultural capital needed to navigate university spaces with confidence.

Participation in events like the Greek Unity Celebration, interactions with colleges, and student organization meetups allowed students to gain insights into the social norms, traditions, and structures that define life at WMU. These experiences helped students internalize the expectations of university culture, including how to approach faculty, engage in leadership opportunities, and integrate into campus life. By introducing students to these cultural dynamics before they even enrolled, WMU proactively addressed one of the key challenges faced by minoritized students: a need for exposure to the informal knowledge necessary to thrive in higher education.

Furthermore, the opportunity to engage in academic conversations with culturally resonant organizations, such as the Lewis Walker Institute, provided students with a sense of scholarship, community, and advocacy that is often absent in mainstream institutional structures. Many minoritized students struggle with imposter syndrome and cultural isolation at PWIs, particularly when they do not see their identities reflected in the institutional environment (Doughty & Martin-Parchment, 2025). By ensuring that students were introduced to academic endeavors focused on minoritized communities, WMU's recruitment innovation affirms that students would not have to compromise their identities to succeed academically. Through this exposure, students gained institutionalized cultural capital, as they developed early familiarity with the academic pathways available at WMU. This knowledge, often inaccessible off-campus, can help ensure that the visiting students can enter college with a strategic advantage, allowing them to engage proactively with opportunities for academic and professional growth.

Framing Theory in Access- and Opportunity-Driven Innovations for Recruitment Initiatives at WMU

WMU's intentional approach to building social and cultural capital through culturally responsive campus recruitment efforts highlights the transformative potential of access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives that go beyond mere representation. By creating meaningful experiences that integrate students' cultural identities into university life, WMU established itself as a model for fostering long-term student success and institutional belonging. These efforts have not only enhanced WMU's appeal as an inclusive institution but have also earned recognition from both the Latinx and African American communities—contributing to record-high retention and graduation rates. The institution's ability to embed cultural and social capital into its strategies illustrates how higher education can shift from simply granting access to actively empowering students to navigate and excel within academic environments.

By focusing on network-building, identity affirmation, and cultural fluency, WMU's recruitment model directly addresses systemic barriers to student persistence in higher education. Rather than assuming that access alone is enough, WMU seeks to ensure that students have the opportunity to enter college equipped with the relationships, institutional connections, and knowledge necessary to succeed. This case study serves as an example for academic leaders seeking to institutionalize recruitment efforts in a theory-based, student-centered manner. WMU's Unity Weekend demonstrates that when universities invest in social and cultural capital-building strategies, they create pathways for minoritized students that extend beyond recruitment—ensuring long-term retention, academic achievement, and professional success.

Conclusion

ADs' ability to embed DEI into institutional frameworks depends on their commitment to harness theory-based strategy as a structural imperative. The case studies from the UM, WMU, and the UK provide real world examples on how academic leaders can collaborate across the institution to operationalize access- and

opportunity-driven change. A critical takeaway from this analysis is that social and cultural capital frameworks can serve as both the foundation and the mechanism for institutional DEI work. While broad-based diversity efforts often struggle to yield tangible, sustained outcomes, targeted, access- and opportunity-driven strategies—those explored in U-M's mentorship and campus interactions, WMU's culturally affirming recruitment, and UK's digital engagement—demonstrate how intentional investment in social networks, institutional connections, and cultural knowledge can create innovation for access and opportunity initiatives.

Theory-Based Strategies as a Lever for Institutional Change

One of the most important insights from these case studies is the role of bridging and linking social capital in the framing of DEI efforts. ADs and their campus partners serve as connectors—bridging historically excluded students with mentors, resources, and institutional networks that facilitate their success. At U-M, the mentorship and campus interactions exemplify how bridging social capital expands students' access to critical peer networks and faculty mentors, providing early exposure to the academic and social expectations of higher education. Similarly, UK's use of social media to connect students with current undergraduates and institutional resources showcases a digital-age approach to bridging social capital, ensuring that minoritized students have early, meaningful engagement with the university community.

However, bridging social capital alone is not enough. For equity work to move beyond recruitment and ensure retention and long-term success, ADs and campus partners must seek to provide students access to linking social capital—connections to institutional power structures, faculty, and key decision-makers. Without intentional efforts to create these links, access and opportunity initiatives remain peripheral rather than embedded within university governance. WMU's Unity Weekend illustrates

how culturally relevant engagement with institutional stakeholders helps students establish these connections before they even enroll. Recruitment, mentorship, and engagement must not be episodic but rather codified by ADs and campus partners into institutional strategy, funding priorities, and governance structures.

Cultural Capital and the Challenge of Institutional Belonging

Another central lesson from these case studies is the necessity of cultural capital in fostering a sense of belonging and persistence in higher education. Minoritized students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, often experience cultural dissonance in PWIs. The access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives explored in this paper illustrate how ADs and other academic leaders can design innovative strategies that expand social and cultural capital—enabling prospective students to envision themselves within the university, navigate institutional spaces with greater confidence, and succeed by drawing on their own cultural and community wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Across U-M, WMU, and UK, DEI access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives serve as mechanisms for transmitting social and cultural capital while affirming the community and cultural wealth that students of color bring with them to higher education. U-M's mentorship program provides early exposure to the hidden curriculum of higher education, equipping students with the informal rules of engagement—how to seek faculty support, apply for research opportunities, and navigate university systems. This process not only imparts institutional knowledge but also validates the resilience, adaptability, and social capital students have already cultivated within their families and communities. Similarly, WMU's Unity Weekend embeds cultural affirmation into the recruitment process, reinforcing that students' identities, traditions, and lived experiences are valued within the institution. By integrating

cultural and artistic celebration into campus life, WMU ensures that students do not feel pressure to assimilate but instead see their backgrounds as sources of strength and belonging. At UK, the social media storytelling strategy functioned as a digital avenue for cultural capital transmission, allowing prospective students to witness and absorb the experiences of peers who have successfully navigated the university environment. By centering student voices and authentic narratives, UK normalized the presence of students of color in higher education spaces and provides a roadmap for success, reducing feelings of alienation.

Collectively, these access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives demonstrate that minoritized students are not entering higher education from a deficit perspective but rather with valuable assets—familial support networks, musical talent, community-driven problem-solving, and resilience—that must be recognized, nurtured, and leveraged as strengths. When institutions actively validate and incorporate these forms of capital into their recruitment, mentorship, and engagement strategies, they can move beyond access alone, fostering an environment where students of color have the opportunity to thrive.

For academic leaders, the institutionalization of access- and opportunity-driven recruiting efforts must be a strategic priority to ensure that universities provide systemic, sustainable opportunities for minoritized students. The Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) principles have emphasized that true equity in higher education requires not just access, but the intentional dismantling of systemic barriers and the redistribution of institutional power (Cochran-Smith & Mitescu Reagan, 2022). Leadership theories, organizational change models, and other empirical perspectives must inform efforts to create environments where historically underrepresented groups do not simply gain access but are empowered with the opportunity to succeed. Institutions cannot assume that students from minoritized backgrounds can easily navigate institutional culture, power structures, and professional pathways on their own, particularly in an educational system where systemic inequities persist. Instead, policies and practices can be deliberately designed with cultural and social capital frameworks in mind to remove barriers, foster belonging, and provide clear pathways for opportunity.

As a final reflection, amid growing political resistance and scrutiny of DEI-focused initiatives, the role of ADs as future institutional leaders has never been more crucial. The long-term sustainability of access and opportunity initiatives in higher education depends on leaders who can move equity efforts beyond isolated programs and embed them as systemic imperatives. The case studies analyzed in this paper illustrate that the strategic deployment of innovative access- and opportunity-driven recruiting initiatives is essential for this transformation. As ADs take on academic leadership roles, they must ensure that DEI is not viewed as a temporary initiative or a leader-dependent effort, but as an essential component of institutional policy, governance, and culture. Social and cultural capital provide a replicable, theory-based framework for sustaining equity work, reinforcing DEI as a fundamental and enduring priority in higher education. The future of equity leadership in universities will be shaped by those who can effectively and courageously scale theory-based strategies and frameworks, while navigating diverse political and institutional landscapes. By leveraging social and cultural capital as strategic assets, today's academic leaders can not only drive transformative change within their institutions but also create lasting pathways for future generations of students to thrive.

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Contents

From Silence to Strategy: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Cross-Racial Academic Leadership

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Abstract

This study explores the leadership journey of an Asian American female associate dean and her White female dean at a predominantly White regional comprehensive university. The research aims to understand the dynamics of cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-positional leadership in higher education, focusing on the challenges and support structures that facilitated their development. Using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as the research method, the study captures the dual narratives of both leaders, highlighting their experiences, reflections, and the relational trust that developed between them. The findings reveal the complexities of navigating race, gender, and institutional politics, emphasizing the importance of mentorship, dialogic reflection, and iterative meaning-making in fostering equity-minded leadership. Implications suggest that higher education institutions should adopt intersectional and justice-oriented frameworks to support the leadership development of women of color and promote collaborative practices. This manuscript contributes to the literature on academic leadership, autoethnography, and equity-oriented leadership, offering insights into how leadership can be co-constructed, supported, and sustained in environments where diverse leadership has faced challenges.

Keywords: Leadership, Collaborative Autoethnography, Mentorship, Intersectionality, Female Leaders of Color

Introduction

This manuscript presents a collaborative autoethnography authored by an Asian American female associate dean and her White female dean, both situated in a College of Education at a predominantly White regional comprehensive university recognized as the flagship teacher education institution in the state. The collaboration provides a rich, layered account of cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-positional leadership dynamics in a higher education context that is deeply influenced by whiteness, patriarchy, and institutionalized norms of leadership.

Existing scholarship on equity and leadership in higher education underscores the significance of racialized and gendered dynamics in shaping professional trajectories. Yet, the experiences of Asian American women remain particularly understudied. National data indicate that although Asian Americans constitute approximately 11% of full-time faculty positions, they hold only about 3% of college presidency roles, with Asian American women comprising

an even smaller proportion (American Council on Education [ACE], 2022; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) offers a useful lens for understanding these patterns, as it highlights how race and gender interact to compound barriers.

Asian American women encounter what has been described as a "bamboo ceiling," where racialized and gendered stereotypes—including perceptions of Asian women as quiet, deferential, or lacking leadership qualities—impede upward mobility even among highly qualified candidates (Alt et al., 2024; Poon et al., 2016). Qualitative studies show how these stereotypes contribute to professional invisibility and exclusion from decision-making networks (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Consequently, Asian American women in academia often find their leadership potential overlooked or undervalued, facing unique challenges compared with their male and white female peers. These findings suggest the importance of attending to intersectional experiences and disaggregated data in leadership development efforts. Such attention not only addresses historical invisibility but also informs more equitable and inclusive pathways for leadership advancement.

In a field where Asian American women are significantly underrepresented in senior academic leadership, this work offers a timely and necessary exploration of leadership development, mentorship, and advocacy. Central to this narrative is the lived experience of the associate dean as an emerging leader navigating the complexities of race, gender, and institutional politics, as well as the role of the dean in shaping, supporting, and learning from that leadership journey. By engaging in collaborative storytelling, dialogic reflection, and iterative meaning-making, the authors seek to unveil both the personal and institutional dimensions of their professional relationship and shared commitment to equity-minded leadership.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the complex terrain of female leadership in higher education, with a particular focus on the experiences and development of women of color in academic leadership roles. Grounded in decades of scholarship, the review begins by highlighting the strengths of female leaders, who are often recognized for their transformational, ethical, and collaborative approaches to leadership. It then turns to the intersecting challenges women of color encounter, including racism, sexism, and institutional exclusion, which influence their leadership trajectories in distinct ways. Key themes such as mentorship, sponsorship, cultural values, and systemic barriers are analyzed to better understand the relational strategies and structural conditions that support more equitable leadership pathways. Together, these studies underscore the importance of intersectional and justice-oriented frameworks in understanding and advancing the leadership experiences of women of color in higher education.

Understanding Female Leadership in Higher Education

In the evolving landscape of higher education leadership, female academic leaders have emerged not only as effective administrators but also as powerful catalysts for gender equity. Decades of research suggest that women consistently outperform their male counterparts in key leadership behaviors, particularly those grounded in transformational, ethical, and collaborative approaches (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). These leadership styles, often rooted in empathy, communication, and a communal orientation, are associated with higher overall effectiveness and team engagement (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Vinkenburg et al., 2011).

Beyond their individual success, many female leaders in academia distinguish themselves by their commitment to cultivating leadership in others. Their influence is especially evident in the ways they recruit, mentor, and sponsor emerging women leaders, helping to dismantle institutional

barriers and reshape leadership pipelines toward greater inclusivity (Hernandez & Longman, 2020; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). These efforts often involve relational practices like trust-building, strategic networking, and intentional advocacy—practices that are essential for disrupting male-centric leadership norms and fostering a more equitable academic culture (Eagly et al., 2003; Kezar & Lester, 2011). Moreover, research suggests that institutions with women in executive roles tend to show improved representation and pay equity for women across leadership tiers (CUPA-HR, 2023).

Yet even within this promising trend, the landscape is not uniformly navigable for all women. Women of color in academic leadership face a complex set of challenges that go beyond gender alone. While White women may benefit from expanding leadership opportunities, women of color often confront intersecting systems of racial bias, invisibility, and heightened scrutiny that shape—and sometimes constrain—their paths to leadership (Turner et al., 2008; Harper, 2012). These experiences underscore the need for intersectional approaches to leadership development that account for both race and gender, recognizing that equity efforts must be nuanced and inclusive to be truly effective (Crenshaw, 1991; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). The following section examines these deeper, layered challenges that uniquely impact women leaders of color, exploring how race, culture, and institutional politics intersect with gender to influence their leadership trajectories.

Institutionalized Norms and Challenges

The institutionalized norms of leadership in higher education are deeply influenced by whiteness and patriarchy. These norms create barriers for women of color, who often face hostility, microaggressions, and tokenism in their professional environments (Chang et al., 2014). Harper (2012) critiques the minimization of racism in higher education research, arguing that scholars often fail to name racism explicitly in their studies. They emphasize the need for a critical race theory (CRT) lens to understand the structural and institutional racism that affects the experiences of minoritized individuals in higher education (Harper, 2012).

Wolfe and Freeman (2013) discuss the underrepresentation of administrators of color in higher education, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). They highlight the historical and ongoing challenges faced by these administrators, including institutional racism and the lack of professional networks and mentors. Their study emphasizes the need for a holistic and integrated approach to diversity leadership, recognizing the complexity of power negotiations and the importance of cultural competence (Wolfe & Freeman, 2013).

Thacker and Freeman (2021) examine the lived experiences of Black provosts at PWIs, revealing the unique barriers they face in their preparation and service. Their study highlights the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and resilience in overcoming social, institutional, and internal barriers. They advocate for early visualization of academic careers and the need for intentional efforts to support and develop future leaders of color (Thacker & Freeman, 2021).

Leadership Development for Women of Color in Higher Education: Mentorship and Sponsorship

Leadership development for women of color in higher education is often shaped by mentorship and developmental relationships. Chang et al (2014) highlight the importance of mentoring in the leadership journeys of academic leaders of color. Mentoring relationships provide essential psychosocial support and career advancement opportunities, particularly for women of color who face double marginality due to racism and sexism (Chang et al., 2014). Santamaría (2013) expands on this by examining how educational leaders of color leverage their identities to address issues of social justice and equity. Her study identifies nine common leadership characteristics, such as engaging in critical conversations and building trust with mainstream

constituents, which are essential for effective leadership in diverse settings (Santamaría, 2013).

Louque (2002) explores the intersection of leadership and cultural values among Hispanic American and African American women scholars. Her study reveals that these women view their cultural values, such as family, community involvement, and political engagement, as sources of strength rather than deficits. These values inform their leadership characteristics, which include visionary thinking, strength, and articulateness, as well as a commitment to social justice and community service (Louque, 2002).

Leadership development for women in academic leadership roles emphasizes both mentorship and sponsorship, yet these concepts are distinct and play complementary roles. Mentorship focuses on professional guidance, psychosocial support, and skill development. Mentors provide feedback, share knowledge about navigating institutional cultures, and serve as sounding boards for professional challenges and opportunities (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007). For women and racially minoritized leaders, mentorship can offer a space to process gendered and racialized experiences, foster confidence, and cultivate leadership identity (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2023).

Sponsorship, in contrast, involves active advocacy and the strategic use of influence. Sponsors create tangible career opportunities for their protégés by recommending them for leadership roles, nominating them for high-profile committees, and publicly endorsing their qualifications (Ibarra et al., 2010). While mentorship primarily supports professional growth, sponsorship directly impacts career mobility and access to leadership pipelines, which is especially critical for women of color, who often face systemic barriers to advancement.

Sponsorship is a distinct and powerful form of developmental relationship that goes beyond mentorship. Hernandez and Longman (2020) emphasize the role of sponsorship in preparing emerging leaders of color for senior leadership roles in higher education. Sponsorship involves active advocacy by senior leaders who use their influence to promote and protect their protégés (Hernandez & Longman, 2020).

Current Study

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to trace the trajectory of Soh Meacham, an Asian American associate dean's rise into leadership, from faculty to administration, capturing the inner negotiations, external challenges, and professional transformations that have marked her journey; and second, to reveal the decision-making processes, intentional support structures, and relational trust cultivated by Colleen Mulholland, the White female dean as she mentored, empowered, and advocated for this emerging leader. Through this collaborative autoethnographic inquiry, the manuscript provides a model for how women across racial lines can engage in mutual growth and leadership transformation in spaces not originally designed for them.

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a methodological approach that allows researchers to explore their personal experiences within a sociocultural context. Chang et al. (2012) describe CAE as an iterative process of self-reflexivity and group exploration, where multiple voices contribute to a collective understanding of social phenomena (Chang et al., 2012). Through this collaborative autoethnography, the authors reflect candidly on their roles, assumptions, and vulnerabilities, emphasizing the power of relational leadership and the significance of trust, empathy, and critical self-awareness in enacting systemic change.

The report of the current study begins with a reflection from the associate dean of this College of Education, who situates her narrative within the sociohistorical and institutional landscape of the university. She recounts pivotal moments from her faculty years—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial uprisings of 2020—when she first began to view herself as a potential leader. These early moments of self-awareness were shaped by both the systemic marginalization she experienced as an Asian American woman and the possibilities

opened up by her engagements with critical scholarship, racial justice dialogues, and collaborative spaces with other scholars of color. As she stepped into the associate dean role, she reflects on how her emerging leadership was shaped through challenges involving power, race, gender, and decision-making—often feeling as though she was "navigating landmines" as the only woman of color in leadership.

In parallel, the dean offers her narrative of becoming, detailing how her own feminist commitments, White identity, and leadership philosophy and values shaped her decisions to not only hire but intentionally mentor and support the associate dean. She shares candid reflections on what it meant to step back, make space, and leverage her positional authority to center voices historically marginalized in academic leadership. The narrative highlights several moments where the dean intentionally took action to uplift the associate dean's leadership—through everyday interactions, structural decision-making, and acts of sponsorship. These stories are not presented as linear successes but as iterative, relational, and sometimes uncomfortable processes of learning, unlearning, and growing together.

The University of Northern Iowa's College of Education (COE) is a leading institution for teacher preparation in its state, offering four undergraduate and ten graduate programs, including the university's only active doctoral program (approximately 100 enrolled). One of the four aforementioned undergraduate degrees is Elementary Education, with approximately 1000 students enrolled in various pathways that include online and traditional modes of delivery. The COE is home to over 100 faculty and staff across four academic departments, which include Educational Foundations & Professional Experiences; Elementary & Middle Level Education; Literacy, Early Childhood & Special Education; and Learning, Leading & Community. The college enrolls approximately 1750 students, with a student body that is about 85% female and increasingly diverse at 11% undergraduate students of color and 22% graduate students of color. Like many colleges of education across the country, the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa remains steadfast in its commitment to fostering inclusive, equitable, and student-centered learning environments. At the same time, both the College of Education and the institution itself are navigating an increasingly complex and shifting policy landscape that presents new challenges to the full expression of these commitments. These dynamics also create additional barriers to the recruitment and retention of students, faculty, and staff from historically marginalized backgrounds, who may understandably seek institutions where inclusion efforts are fully resourced and publicly affirmed.

Together, the authors weave a story that speaks to the possibilities of race-conscious, equity-oriented, and feminist leadership in higher education. They engage in critical reflections on power, voice, allyship, and the vulnerability required to lead with integrity. This manuscript contributes to the growing literature on women of color in academic leadership, collaborative autoethnography, and cross-racial mentoring, offering a deeply personal and politically engaged account of how leadership is co-constructed, supported, and sustained in spaces where it has not always been welcomed. Their story invites others to imagine leadership as a collective and transformative practice.

Woven Narratives: The Report of the Current Study

Between Silence and Speaking: What We Didn't Yet Know

Soh: I walked into Dean Mulholland's conference room in the middle of April, the air feeling both crisp and heavy with the weight of what I was about to discuss. Sunlight streamed through the window, splashing across the table like a silent invitation — or perhaps a warning. I needed to discuss the possibility of my early promotion to Full professorship, yet the words felt tangled in my mind, elusive and uncertain.

I clutched my CV tightly, its pages slightly bent from my anxious grip. Inside were the fruits of my labor — two books and about 30 journal

articles or book chapters — yet in this moment, they seemed like fragile tokens, vulnerable to scrutiny. My teaching assessment records, solid and steady, offered quiet reassurance, yet I couldn't silence the voice whispering, *Is it enough?*

I had the Professional Assessment Committee (PAC) and the department head's support for my early promotion case attached — clear endorsements that should have steadied my nerves. Yet doubt clung to me like a stubborn shadow.

Standing there, I found myself rehearsing possible outcomes. *What if she says it's not a good idea?* The thought curled in my chest like a tightening knot. *What if she sees my credentials as lacking?*

The sunlight danced across the room, warm yet indifferent, as if to say that whatever happened next was out of my hands — but I knew I had to speak, no matter how uncertain I felt.

The Dean walked into the conference room with a warm smile, her face illuminated by the sunlight that streamed through the window. The glow seemed to follow her, wrapping her in an aura of ease and confidence. Meanwhile, I felt anything but at ease. My heart thudded in my chest, and my mind stumbled over itself. *Oh boy… how do I start?* The thought flickered through me like a sudden gust of wind, unsettling and persistent.

As I sat there, I remembered the first time I had met her — not as a Dean, but as a candidate for the Associate Dean position. I had been on the search committee that ultimately brought her to the College of Education. Back then, I had observed her from across the table, asking questions, evaluating her responses, and helping make a decision that felt significant. Yet since then, I realized with a twinge of discomfort, I had barely spoken to her at all.

In truth, I had drifted away from the social rhythms of the university. I had spent too long on the periphery, feeling like an outsider — a feeling shaped as much by my own guardedness as by the undercurrents of department politics. Instead of seeking connection, I had buried

myself in my work, turning to writing as both refuge and purpose. I wrote, wrote, and wrote some more — as if stringing words together on a page could steady the uncertainty I felt in my professional world.

And now, sitting face to face with Dean Mulholland, I found myself unsure of how to break the silence. Words hovered on the edge of my mind, yet none felt right. The quiet between us seemed to stretch, vast and unsteady, leaving me searching for the right way to begin.

The truth was, my distance from the College of Education wasn't just a matter of busyness or distraction — it was shaped by something deeper, something harder to name. There had been moments, unsettling and painful, that left me feeling vulnerable as an Asian American female professor. While I won't speak of those episodes in detail, they lingered in my mind like shadows that refused to fade. Each memory seemed to whisper a warning: *Be careful. Don't draw too much attention. Don't make yourself a target.*

As a tenure-track probationary faculty member, I had often worried that tenure and promotion could be an uphill battle — one made even steeper by my identity. I knew the unspoken rules, the quiet burdens that faculty of color, particularly Asian American women, often carried. We were expected to excel — not just to meet expectations, but to surpass them, to prove ourselves over and over again.

Then COVID-19 arrived, and that quiet fear intensified. The pandemic wasn't just a public health crisis — it also unleashed a surge of anti-Asian hostility that seeped into everyday life. While I continued teaching, writing, and navigating the demands of academia, I couldn't ignore the underlying anxiety that seemed to follow me everywhere. Every trip to campus or the grocery store carried a new layer of uncertainty — a gnawing awareness that my presence might provoke something dangerous.

That awareness shaped how I moved through the department. I kept my head down and my focus sharp, convincing myself that if I just worked hard enough — if I wrote,

published, and taught with diligence — I could build a career that no one could question. Writing became my armor, my way of asserting my place in the academy without making too much noise.

But that choice came at a cost. The more I withdrew into my work, the more distant I felt from the rhythms of department life — the casual conversations in the hallway, the shared laughter at faculty meetings, the sense of belonging that seemed to come easily to others. The isolation brought on by COVID only deepened that feeling. Faculty gatherings moved to screens, and the quiet gaps I once felt in person became full-blown silences in virtual spaces. I told myself it was better this way — safer — but now, sitting across Dean Mulholland, I wondered if my silence had also kept me from being seen.

Colleen Mulholland, dean: Dr. Meacham's email landed in my inbox with a request for a meeting. I assumed it was the usual conversation about promotion and tenure, but when we sat down, her request surprised me—she wanted to go up for full professor one year early. That immediately piqued my curiosity.

"Why? What's the rush?" I asked.

Without hesitation, she explained that her long-term goal was to transition into administration. She believed that achieving full professor status would make her a stronger candidate for leadership roles. She had already started looking at positions elsewhere, and the credential was a key part of making her competitive. She assured me that she met all the evaluation criteria and hoped I would support her request.

I wondered if Dr. Meacham remembered that I took the interim dean position and appointment of dean for two years after that (during COVID) as an associate professor. I wondered if she had remembered that my dossier review of my own promotion to full professor was in the same department in which she had a voice in the process. I recall smiling and saying: "Well, not all academic administration jobs require the rank of full professor—look at me!" I

had my own story of traversing promotion and tenure in the last few years in which I earned promotion but after significant unease, as administrators carry a very different load than the traditional faculty member with a portfolio of teaching, scholarship and service.

This was also the moment I needed to address her immediate question. Yet, I paused. As dean, I am privy to more information and context across academic affairs. During last year's tenure review process, I witnessed a deeply troubling outcome—one of our most prolific junior faculty members was denied early tenure. Despite their outstanding contributions, when their record was assessed strictly through the quantitative lens outlined in our handbook, they fell short. I advocated strongly to the provost on their behalf, but without clear, aligned criteria to support an exception, the case could not move forward. The provost's decision stood, despite my disagreement. This experience revealed how inflexible and, at times, arbitrary our evaluation system can be particularly when excellence is reduced to metrics that fail to capture the full scope of a faculty member's impact. In response, there was a call to revise the tenure and promotion language in the handbook to allow for more qualitative and contextualized evaluation. But even then, I found myself questioning how to ensure fairness and consistency. Would revised language better serve our faculty, or would it simply shift the ambiguity to new forms of subjectivity?

The internal politics surrounding tenure decisions cannot be ignored, nor can the emotional and professional toll they take on our faculty. I realized I could not support another cycle where exceptional individuals were penalized by moving goalposts or opaque standards. The process must be rigorous—but also just, humane, and reflective of the diverse ways faculty demonstrate excellence. All that as background noise in my head, I couldn't quite read Dr. Meacham: Was she mad? Or angry? Nervous or frustrated? Not at or about me personally, but about process perhaps? About not getting an administrative position somewhere

else? It was hard to tell. I needed to dig into that more - this was not her usual disposition. Her reasoning for early promotion to full professor was sound, but I wasn't convinced this was the right direction for her at this moment…I just didn't recommend this for her at this time. So, instead, I leaned in and asked, "Tell me—what do you really want to do in your career?"

Dr. Meacham's expression shifted as she spoke about her passion for running a center, particularly a child development center. This clearly aligned with her significant early childhood education background. Her voice gained momentum as she described how our university's Child Development Center was brimming with untapped potential. To her, it was more than a place for child care—it could be a hub for research, a space to elevate faculty work, a model of best practices in early childhood education. At this moment, I was humbled that I had not once, in my deanship, considered anything different with our child development center—the hallmark of my leadership in this deanship has been to challenge the status quo and to affirm that our processes were strong, up to date, forward thinking. AH HA! Yes, of course—this is a brilliant idea! Why couldn't the child development center do all of this (research, elevate faculty, new support for our students)…and how could I get that to be arranged under her watch?

She was envisioning something bigger than a title. She was thinking about impact. And I recognized something important in that moment—she was not just seeking an exit strategy. She was seeking a pathway to leadership.

Between Question and Clarity: What We Came to See

Soh: To my surprise, the conversation began with ease — even warmth. Dean Mulholland's smile lingered as she took her seat, and before I knew it, we were exchanging lighthearted remarks.

"Oh, I see you've claimed the best chair in the room," she said with a grin, nodding at the sturdy conference chair I'd chosen.

I chuckled. "Well, I figured I'd need all the support I can get today," I replied, patting the armrest for emphasis.

She laughed — a genuine sound that filled the room with a sense of comfort I hadn't expected. For a moment, I felt the tension in my shoulders loosen. We swapped a few more remarks — about the unpredictable spring weather, about how stubbornly the office plants refused to thrive — and for that brief stretch, it felt like I wasn't sitting there to make a daunting request.

But soon enough, the conversation turned. The Dean's expression softened with concern as she leaned forward slightly.

"I'll be honest with you," she said. "Early promotion… it's rare. Almost impossible, really."

Her words settled heavily in the room, anchoring the air between us. She explained that over the past couple of years, every early promotion request had been denied — no exceptions. Her voice wasn't unkind, but there was a finality to it that made my heart sink.

Then Dean Mulholland asked the question that seemed to pierce right through me:

"So… why do you want early promotion?"

I paused, feeling the weight of her words. Why *did* I want this? The answer was complicated — tangled with years of hard work, moments of self-doubt, and the quiet hope that recognition might bring some sense of security. I opened my mouth to speak, but for a moment, I wasn't sure where to begin.

Colleen: At the time of Soh's initial outreach to me, there had been a recent transition in university leadership. A new provost brought with them evolving norms around promotion and tenure review. This shift created a sense of uncertainty for many, including me. I was especially conscious of not wanting any faculty member, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, to be caught in the politics of institutional change; I

didn't want that ambiguity to overshadow the substance or perceived strength of an early promotion dossier. When Dr. Meacham asked to meet, I wasn't entirely sure what she was really asking. Her request felt layered—there must have been more to it—but I couldn't immediately identify what.

Between Visibility and Vision: What We Were Beginning to Build

Soh: The Dean's question lingered in the air, and for a moment, I sat in silence. *Why do you want early promotion?* It seemed so simple, yet it reached into places I hadn't fully explored.

Her question wasn't just practical — it was phenomenal, like an unexpected key unlocking a door I didn't realize I had been standing before. It pulled me back to my earliest aspirations — the ones I had quietly nurtured but rarely spoken aloud. I had long imagined stepping into a higher education leadership role, yet that vision had always felt distant, like a mirage flickering just out of reach.

Invisibility — that was what had fueled this quiet longing. As an Asian American faculty member, I had often felt unseen in academic spaces, my presence overlooked or underestimated. The pandemic only intensified that feeling. COVID-19 had exposed — and heightened — the racial fault lines that had always been there. The surge in anti-Asian hate during those years, especially the devastating Atlanta shooting, left me shaken. The tragedy had pressed on a fragile, unspoken fear I had carried for years — a fear of being targeted, erased, or forgotten.

But more than that, it stirred something deeper — a sense of responsibility. I began to wonder: *What can I do?* The answer wasn't immediate, but the pieces slowly started to form. Higher education needed more Asian American leaders — people who could see those gaps in visibility and belonging because they had lived them. People who could speak to those experiences with courage and clarity.

Yet until that moment in the Dean's conference room, those thoughts had felt

scattered — like puzzle pieces I had been turning over in my mind without knowing where they fit. Her question changed that. It was as if a new beam of light had cut through the haze, illuminating what had once been uncertain. Suddenly, everything was clear.

"I want to be an administrator," I said, my voice steadier than I expected. "And I need to be a full professor to pursue that path."

The words hung there, exposed and vulnerable, yet somehow right. For the first time, I wasn't just sharing my qualifications or ambitions — I was sharing a piece of myself.

Colleen: Dr. Meacham said she wanted to advance, yet I could tell from how she explained her professional goals that she wasn't simply chasing a title, but rather, she was seeking to shape institutional change. To me, this was exactly who I needed and wanted on my team - one conversation had illuminated shared values and purpose to elevate the work of our College of Education. Kezar and Lester (2011) describe this kind of emergent leadership as an essential yet often overlooked aspect of higher education administration. Rather than filling traditional hierarchical roles, emergent leaders identify institutional needs and innovate within their existing contexts. Dr. Meacham's aspirations fit within this framework—she wasn't simply chasing a title, but rather, she was seeking to shape institutional change. To me, this was exactly who I needed and wanted on my team - one conversation had revealed shared values and purpose to elevate the work of our College of Education.

I vividly remember this meeting blossoming into a true conversation. This dynamic aligns with Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which emphasizes the importance of individualized relationships between leaders and followers in shaping professional growth. Dr. Meacham and I had developed a relationship where trust, mentorship, and candid dialogue allowed us to explore not just her stated goals but also the deeper motivations behind them. LMX theory suggests that high-quality leader-member

relationships contribute to more engaged and effective leadership development, which was exactly what unfolded in this scenario. Teamwork is one of my core values and I am a stronger leader when I have authentic, trusting, and optimistic teammates.

Additionally, the principles of Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006) help frame how I approached this situation. The work of leading a college of over 100 faculty and staff is not work to do alone and be successful. Distributed leadership suggests that leadership is not confined to a single individual but is instead spread across multiple roles and responsibilities within an institution. By identifying Dr. Meacham's strengths and aligning them with an institutional need, I was leveraging a distributed leadership approach that empowered faculty agency and innovation rather than reinforcing a rigid hierarchical structure.

Furthermore, what Dr. Meacham didn't know was that I had been laying the groundwork for a second full-time, 12-month associate dean position in the college. Up to that point, the college had one associate dean focused on undergraduate studies and teacher education. But I saw an urgent need for leadership in graduate studies, research, and faculty scholarship—key areas that required dedicated attention and leadership.

The Pivot That Revealed the Possibility

Soh: Dean Mulholland's words echoed in my mind like a soothing refrain: "You can still be an administrator even if you are an associate professor." Her reassurance felt like a lifeline, pulling me from the depths of my disappointment. She leaned back in her chair, her expression thoughtful yet encouraging. "Sit tight," she said with a knowing smile, "there will be some opportunities."

As I walked out of the Dean's conference room, a kaleidoscope of emotions swirled within me. The possibility of early promotion had slipped through my fingers, yet I wasn't entirely discouraged. In fact, I felt a renewed sense of determination. Dean Mulholland's words had

planted a seed of hope, and as I stepped into the sunlight outside, I felt more encouraged than I had in a long time.

About a month later, an internal search announcement caught my eye: Associate Dean of the College of Education. My heart skipped a beat. Could this be the opportunity the Dean Mulholland had hinted at? The thought lingered, growing stronger with each passing day. I decided to apply, driven by a quiet resolve that had been building within me.

To my surprise and delight, I was selected for the position. I became the Associate Dean. The news spread quickly, and soon, everyone I knew from outside the university was reaching out, expressing their astonishment. They had heard me speak of feeling marginalized, of the challenges I faced as an Asian American woman in academia. How, then, had I suddenly taken on a leadership role that can make a significant impact?

In a conversation with the Dean, I shared my thoughts on how Asian Americans often feel that leadership roles in academia are out of reach. Her response was simple yet profound: "If you don't say it, how do we know?" Her words resonated deeply. It seemed so straightforward, yet it held a powerful truth. Pursuing leadership wasn't just about qualifications or experience; it was about voicing one's aspirations, claiming one's place with confidence.

Colleen: Through careful planning and discussions with the provost, I secured approval for an interim structure that allowed us to test different leadership portfolios. We would appoint two interim associate deans—one for graduate studies and one for research and faculty scholarship—as well as a dedicated doctoral program coordinator for our growing Ed.D. program. We had one year to figure it out and I was ready to move forward.

Rather than drafting the position descriptions in isolation, I built them around both the needs of the college and the existing talent within our faculty. This approach aligns with Bolman and Deal's (2017) reframing leadership model, which emphasizes structuring leadership opportunities around institutional needs while

also considering the human resource and political dynamics at play.

The associate dean for graduate studies would focus on reinvigorating our graduate programs, enhancing recruitment and retention, and overseeing new initiatives like a Master of Arts in Teaching program. The research and faculty scholarship role would establish pathways for professional development, strengthen our college's research centers, and elevate faculty scholarship and external funding efforts. Meanwhile, the Ed.D. coordinator would provide stability and leadership for our doctoral students while representing our program nationally.

When I formally announced these interim positions, I ensured that faculty across the college were aware of the opportunity. I reached out personally to those I believed had both the skills and the aspirations to take on these leadership roles. This proactive talent development aligns with Gmelch and Buller's (2015) concept of academic leadership pipelines, which stress the importance of identifying and nurturing leadership potential within the faculty ranks.

Dr. Meacham applied for the interim research and faculty scholarship associate dean position. Her application confirmed what I had sensed in our conversation—she was ready for a leadership role, and her vision aligned, if not exceeded with what the college needed. Rather than leaving for another institution, she saw the potential to make an impact right where she was.

This experience reinforced an important lesson for me as a leader: when faculty express a desire to leave, it's not always about dissatisfaction. Sometimes, they're looking for their next challenge, an opportunity to contribute in new and meaningful ways. The key is to listen—not just to what they say they want, but to what drives them, what excites them, and what problems they see as opportunities for change.

Dr. Meacham thought she needed to leave to grow. Instead, she found a way to lead from within. And in doing so, she became a vital part of shaping the future of our college.

Foundations of Leadership and Equity

Soh: My first official duty as Associate Dean came even before my contract had officially started. I found myself attending the Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) conference alongside the Dean and other associate deans. The conference was a gathering of minds committed to transforming educational institutions into bastions of justice and equity. As I walked into the conference hall, I felt a sense of anticipation and purpose, knowing that this was the beginning of a new chapter in my academic journey.

At the conference, I was introduced to the Education Colleges for Justice & Equity: A Framework for Assessment and Transformation, commonly referred to as 'The EDJE Framework' (Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2019). This comprehensive framework was designed to guide colleges of education in assessing and transforming their practices to promote justice and equity. The Dean, with her characteristic enthusiasm, shared her thoughts on the framework. "This is not just a set of guidelines; it's a call to action," she said, her eyes sparkling with conviction. "It's about making tangible changes that reflect our commitment to equity."

As I delved into the EDJE Framework, I was struck by its depth and clarity. It emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing multiple and hidden forms of injustice within educational institutions. The framework outlined how injustices and inequities play out at individual, institutional, and ideological levels, and it provided a collaborative approach to raise awareness and develop a shared understanding of these issues.

My review of the framework left me in awe of Dean Mulholland's quiet yet deliberate efforts to implement these principles within our college. She had been working tirelessly behind the scenes, making significant strides toward a more equitable academic community. Her dedication was evident in the diverse faculty she had brought on board, each one contributing unique perspectives and enriching our academic discourse. Her approach to resource distribution

ensured that every department, regardless of its size or focus, received the support it needed to thrive. It was clear that she viewed equity not as a distant ideal but as a practical, achievable goal.

One particular episode stood out in my mind, highlighting the Dean's commitment to diversity. She once told the search committee chair to add two more finalists to the list to include more diverse candidates. This decision led to the hiring of a faculty member of color, enriching our college with new perspectives and experiences. Her proactive approach demonstrated her unwavering dedication to creating a more inclusive academic environment.

Dean Mulholland's commitment to justice and equity was not just theoretical; it was woven into the very fabric of our college's strategic planning and implementation. She had centered justice and equity in our COE's vision, mission statements, and core values, ensuring that these guiding documents explicitly reflected our commitment. Her strategic plan included measurable outcomes, clear activities, and timelines, all designed to advance our equity goals effectively.

As I reflected on these efforts, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. The EDJE Framework was more than just a document; it was a blueprint for meaningful change. And now, as Associate Dean, I had the opportunity to contribute to this transformative journey. The path ahead was challenging, but with the Dean's guidance and the framework's principles, I felt equipped to navigate the complexities of academia and advocate for justice and equity.

Colleen: As the new academic year loomed on the horizon, an opportunity emerged—one that felt almost tailor-made for our team. A professional development conference designed specifically for dean and associate dean teams was scheduled just before the semester began. Professional development conferences tailored for academic leaders, such as deans and associate deans, provide essential training and networking opportunities that are crucial for effective leadership in higher education. These events offer sessions on topics like positive academic

leadership and teamwork, which are vital for new and seasoned administrators alike, (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023). It was perfect timing.

For us, this wasn't just another conference; it was a chance to break the ice, to truly get to know each other in a setting that encouraged collaboration and trust. Stepping into our respective roles, we knew that building a strong foundation early would set the tone for the work ahead. The conference provided that space—a shared experience that helped us navigate our positions with clarity while fostering the relationships essential for effective leadership.

Networking was a cornerstone of the event. Engaging with other teams, we saw firsthand how different institutions approached their challenges, expanding our understanding of what was possible within our own roles. We balanced internal conversations with external learning, gaining insights that not only strengthened our professional development but also deepened our collective investment in our team's success.

The takeaways were powerful and lasting. The time spent together at the conference paid off as we launched into the academic year smoothly and in sync. We had built a sense of trust, a shared vision, and a momentum that carried us forward—making that early investment one of the best decisions we could have made.

Mentorship, Leadership Development, and Strategic Transitions

Soh: The truth is I hadn't had much training to be an administrator – and as an Asian American woman, I hadn't seen many role models in leadership at my university. This absence often left me feeling adrift, navigating uncharted waters without a clear guide. Do we need a role model who shares the same skin color and speaks with the same accent? It could be great, offering a sense of familiarity and shared experience. But I have come to realize that leadership can transcend these superficial markers.

What truly matters is the presence of mentors who wield the right tools, like The EDJE Framework, to guide and support emerging leaders. The framework's principles of justice and equity provide a solid foundation upon which to build a transformative leadership journey. It is not the color of one's skin or the accent of one's voice that defines a leader; it is the commitment to equity, the courage to challenge injustices, and the dedication to fostering an inclusive environment.

With the guidance of mentors who embody these values, I have found the strength to grow into my role as Associate Dean. The path has not been easy, but the support and wisdom of those around me have illuminated the way. The EDJE Framework has been instrumental in shaping my approach to leadership, offering a blueprint for meaningful change and a reminder that equity is both a goal and a practice.

As I reflect on my journey, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunities that have come my way and the mentors who have believed in me. My rise to leadership is not just a personal achievement; it is a testament to the power of mentorship and the transformative potential of justice-oriented frameworks. Together, we can create a more equitable and inclusive academic community, where all voices are heard and all individuals are valued.

Colleen: Two months later, we attended another leadership conference—this time with an even sharper focus. It was an opportunity to showcase our work on a national stage, deepen our networking, and engage in discipline-specific discussions with leaders from regional comprehensive teacher education institutions. The experience further strengthened our collaboration, reinforcing our shared goals and expanding our perspectives.

On our way back to campus, we stopped for lunch during the drive when my phone rang. It was the provost's office with an update on the most recent rankings from the grants and sabbatical committee. The list for the upcoming year had been finalized, and Dr. Meacham was at the top. The provost wanted to know if I could support her absence.

I knew this was a rare opportunity. Given Dr. Meacham's interest in administration, I recognized that a sabbatical later in her career would be unlikely. Without hesitation, I gave my full support. As dean, I try to anticipate staffing needs well in advance, and this information was crucial in mapping out our next steps—especially after the momentum we had built over the past few months.

When Dr. Meacham was officially notified, she came to my office to discuss it. She expressed how much she enjoyed her role as associate dean and was willing to forgo the sabbatical to continue in her position. But I insisted she take it. This was an opportunity she had earned, and one that would serve her well in the long run. She ultimately accepted, scheduling her sabbatical for the following fall. With that decision made, we turned our focus to ensuring a strong finish to the year while setting plans in motion for a smooth transition in her absence.

As we planned for the fall and mapped out Dr. Meacham's sabbatical, another shift was unfolding. The other interim associate dean was pursuing a leadership role in the Provost's office. Anticipating potential staffing changes for the following year, I saw an opportunity to rethink the structure of these interim roles. Instead of maintaining two part-time positions, I began seriously considering a recalibration—one that would consolidate responsibilities into a single, full-time, 12-month associate dean position.

Much of the process involved waiting as the search for the associate provost role played out. Once the interim associate dean was officially named Associate Provost of Faculty, I was able to move forward with a concrete plan. I met with Dr. Meacham to discuss the realities of merging the interim roles. What responsibilities were essential? What could be streamlined? How could the new role align with her strengths and interests while also addressing the needs of the college and faculty?

With these questions guiding our conversation, we shaped a new, more sustainable

position. I secured approval from the provost to maintain the funding line and creatively repurpose resources to support a full-time associate dean. From there, we launched an internal search within the college, consulted with key stakeholders, and moved forward with the transition—ensuring that the new structure would not only enhance leadership capacity but also provide stability and continuity for the college.

Dr. Meacham's time as interim associate dean had been a crucial training ground—an opportunity to develop her leadership skills, navigate complex administrative challenges, and refine her vision for the role. Serving in interim administrative positions allows individuals to gain valuable leadership experience and prepare for permanent roles within higher education institutions. Interim roles provide a platform for faculty to develop administrative competencies and understand the complexities of academic leadership (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). When the full-time position was officially created, she embraced the challenge, applying through a public search process. She was thoroughly vetted by internal constituents, demonstrating not only her deep understanding of the college's needs but also her ability to lead with insight and integrity.

Through her hard work, commitment, and preparation, Dr. Meacham earned the permanent position. Her appointment was made effective the day after her sabbatical concluded—a fitting transition that marked the culmination of her professional growth (and the beginning of the next chapter!) and the realization of her goal to step fully into administration.

Soh's Reflection: Unveiling the Path to Leadership

The dean's narrative allowed me to apprehend, perhaps for the first time with full clarity, the arc of my own leadership trajectory. It illuminated the sequence of events, intentions, and institutional dynamics that culminated in my current role as associate dean. More than a retrospective, the narrative served as a mirror, reflecting back a journey shaped not by happenstance or tokenism, but by vision, preparedness, and purpose.

What I found particularly affirming was the implicit and explicit dismantling of a question that often lingers for faculty of color in positions of leadership: *Was I chosen for who I am, or for what I can do?* The dean's account made it unequivocally clear—I was not appointed on the basis of my identity alone, but because of the congruence between institutional needs and the capabilities, commitments, and strategic thinking I brought to the table. That affirmation, though unspoken in our day-to-day interactions, resonated deeply.

To be frank, stepping into leadership as an Asian American woman often comes with an invisible burden—the suspicion, both internal and external, that one's presence might serve to "check a box." Institutions are often under increasing pressure to diversify their leadership ranks, and the temptation to read one's appointment as fulfilling a representational quota can be difficult to dispel. I have, at times, wondered if I was one of the "onlys"—the only woman of color, the only East Asian voice—placed in a position to project inclusivity rather than enact substantive change.

Reading the narrative, however, helped untangle that knot. I saw clearly that my selection emerged not from a performative gesture toward diversity, but from an authentic recognition of my readiness and the clarity of my vision. My appointment was not symbolic; it was strategic. That distinction matters—and the dean's narrative made it unmistakably clear.

The recollection of our initial meeting, in which I voiced my desire to pursue early promotion to full professor, was particularly evocative. At the time, I anticipated a transactional conversation—one in which I would make a case, and she would weigh the procedural risks and merits. Instead, what unfolded was far more nuanced. Her response—"Tell me, what do you really want to do in your career?"—cut to the heart of my motivations. It marked a departure from the bureaucracy of rank and title and gestured toward something more generative:

a commitment to growth, impact, and leadership as praxis.

That moment was transformative. It was the first time I articulated aloud my desire to lead, not abstractly, but in concrete, institutionally grounded ways. I spoke about the Child Development Center—not simply as a childcare facility, but as an underutilized site of pedagogical innovation, faculty scholarship, and community engagement. The dean didn't just acknowledge this vision—she embraced it, and more importantly, she created a space for me to act upon it. That kind of receptivity to faculty imagination is rare, and I do not take it for granted.

Later, when she reached out about the interim associate dean positions, I recognized the gesture not merely as an invitation, but as an investment. Applying was not about ambition in its conventional sense, but rather about aligning my professional commitments with a role that would allow me to operationalize them. The fact that the position was not prefabricated but instead scaffolded around both institutional exigency and individual faculty strengths reflects a remarkable degree of intentionality and inclusive leadership.

In revisiting this narrative, I felt a quiet pride—pride that I had taken the risk to articulate my aspirations honestly, and that I had done so with someone who listened with discernment. That single conversation catalyzed a shift not only in my professional direction but also in how I see myself within the ecosystem of higher education leadership.

What the dean's narrative ultimately reminds me is that leadership is neither a static title nor a linear ascent. It is emergent, relational, and deeply contextual. I am grateful to have had a mentor who modeled that truth and who helped me chart a course that was both intellectually rigorous and personally meaningful. In an academy where so much feels provisional, I now move forward with a renewed sense of clarity, confidence, and commitment.

Colleen's Reflection: From Assumptions to Collaborative Agency

Reading Soh's narrative has deepened my awareness of how cultural frameworks shape dynamics within academic leadership, particularly in relation to supervision, authority, and professional aspiration. I recognize now that I underestimated the powerful influence of culture in these dynamics. Understanding Soh's cultural context—where respect for hierarchy is not only customary but expected—helped me better interpret her earlier approaches and goals in striving toward leadership in higher education. What once seemed like reticence or hesitation now appears as culturally informed intentionality. Equally important was the way our relationship evolved. A single honest conversation became the catalyst for a meaningful professional partnership grounded in mutual respect, truth, and transparency. This reminds me of Freire's notion of dialogic engagement—the belief that authentic dialogue can be a site of transformation. Through this dialogue, we both moved from assumption, maybe even misunderstanding, to strategy, building a shared understanding that has strengthened our collaboration.

Initiative is one of my core values and I see that clearly reflected in Soh's actions. She sought out conversation, shared her aspirations, and actively followed through on opportunities to grow. These are not just markers of ambition, but indicators of leadership capacity. Her actions align with Bandura's concept of agency—particularly personal and proxy agency—as she took deliberate steps to shape her environment and build leadership identity. Over time, our work together has become a process of co-constructing agency, shaped by our distinct cultural backgrounds but also by a shared commitment to ethical, inclusive leadership. Soh's narrative challenged me to examine my own assumptions and expand my understanding of how cultural identity and structural context intersect in leadership development. It reminds me that growth—in ourselves and in others—often starts with intentional listening, openness

to difference, and a willingness to shift perspectives.

Implications

The dual narratives from the associate dean and the dean provide a compelling, situated account of leadership emergence in higher education that holds critical implications for research, practice, and policy. While grounded in theoretical frameworks such as Kezar and Lester's (2011) emergent leadership and Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, the associate dean's narrative also embodies a lived reality shaped by race, gender, and institutional culture. As an Asian American woman navigating a predominantly white academic environment, her leadership journey underscores the need for a more nuanced, equity-conscious understanding of leadership pathways in academia.

For research, the associate dean's trajectory calls for deeper exploration into how faculty from historically underrepresented racial and gender identities engage in leadership emergence. Kezar and Lester's (2011) framework helps highlight how innovation and leadership often stem from recognizing gaps in institutional capacity—such as creating scholarly partnerships or supporting graduate education—yet the ways these contributions are perceived can vary depending on the leader's identity. Research should interrogate how Asian American women leaders, in particular, navigate institutional expectations, implicit bias, and cultural norms to construct legitimacy and authority. There is also a pressing need to study tokenism—not only as a symbolic gesture of diversity but also how it affects real decision-making power and long-term leadership opportunities. The associate dean's reflections point to the subtle tensions that can arise when institutional efforts toward diversity are not fully matched by structures of empowerment and influence. While leadership opportunities may be extended, they must also be accompanied by genuine authority and voice to avoid perceptions of symbolic inclusion.

Leadership practice must therefore evolve to intentionally recognize and nurture leadership in ways that are both context-responsive and justice-oriented. LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) emphasizes the significance of leader-follower dynamics rooted in mutual respect and trust. The dean's deliberate mentorship and open dialogue with the associate dean exemplify how strong relational dynamics can support emerging leaders who may otherwise remain on the margins of institutional influence. This relational investment becomes especially critical when the emerging leader holds identities that have historically been excluded from decision-making spaces. Without intentional support and sponsorship, the risk of marginalization—even in formal leadership roles—remains high. Distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) also emerges as a vital strategy in advancing leadership equity. When leadership is shared across organizational actors rather than concentrated in a single position, it allows for a broader spectrum of perspectives and talents to inform decision-making. In the case of the associate dean, the distributed leadership structure created by the dean allowed her to step into meaningful responsibility while being mentored and assessed. Yet, distribution without support can devolve into burden-sharing rather than empowerment (Harris, 2014). Institutions must ensure that distributed leadership models do not inadvertently exploit leaders of color by expecting them to carry equity work without the structural power to enact change (Turner et al., 2008).

From a policy perspective, higher education institutions should adopt frameworks like Bolman and Deal's (2017) reframing model to redesign leadership structures with attention to both systemic function and human capacity. Specifically, the human resource frame calls for policies that center mentorship, culturally responsive leadership development, and succession planning. Gmelch and Buller's (2015) work on leadership pipelines is particularly relevant: policies should embed leadership development opportunities at all faculty ranks,

with special attention to nurturing underrepresented faculty through transitional roles, professional development funding, and cross-campus networks.

In sum, these narratives illuminate the critical intersection of theory and lived experience in shaping institutional strategies for inclusive leadership development. For Asian American women and other leaders from marginalized communities, it is essential to move beyond traditional notions of leadership as merely a function of positional authority. Instead,

leadership must be understood as a relational, distributed, and justice-oriented practice that is rooted in community, collaboration, and equity. Achieving this vision requires more than just theoretical clarity - it demands sustained and comprehensive institutional commitment to mentorship, recognition, and the intentional restructuring of leadership pathways. Such an approach not only empowers marginalized voices but also fosters an inclusive culture of leadership that can drive systemic change and promote long-term transformation.

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Contents

Stereotypes, Perceptions, and Emotions: An Asian Woman Leader's Leadership Dilemma

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Abstract

Asian women leaders (AWLs) face the "bamboo ceiling," where despite their competence, they lack representation in leadership positions. The current essay explored why this phenomenon happened to AWLs with a particular emphasis on how positive stereotypes surrounding Asians affected them when they tried to enact authentic leadership. It concludes with wider implications regarding AWLs' leadership opportunities and success.

Leadership is "exercised in the context of working with others" (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017, p. 404) and is a continuous and ongoing process where members are co-producers and its outcome (Uhl-Bien et. al., 2014). It is a reciprocal and collective process by which a leader and members jointly construct the efficacy demanded to advance their work (Ospina & Su, 2009). In this sense, the quality of interactions between a leader and members and the relationships that follow matter. Successful leadership is about building high-quality relationships with members to achieve shared goals. This is the premise of authentic leadership. In seeing a leader's values through lived action, members begin to trust a leader and build a quality relationship. A leader must be perceived as possessing both competency and character (intentions and values) to be trusted (Hill & Lineback, 2011). I am a petite Japanese immigrant woman leader in academia who speaks impeccable English but with a foreign accent. I have found this relational nature of authentic leadership challenging.

Luckily, I am not alone. Leaders from minoritized groups find resistance from members as they attempt to be their full, authentic selves (Butler, 2004; Lee et al., 2008). This is because "authenticity" is a relational concept. It is enacted within specific contexts with others. Therefore, being authentic cannot simply be self-aware and display values true to self. The role of others and the context in which relationships are enacted (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017) must be critically considered. This essay analyzes what barriers exist for Asian women leaders (AWLs) to enact authentic leadership and what wider implications such barriers present concerning AWLs' leadership.

Authentic Leadership and Leaders of Color

Many leaders of color face a challenge when enacting authentic leadership because the fundamental question of what leadership is framed from the dominant group's viewpoints (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009). In a predominantly white and male higher education environment, women leaders of color have a difficult time being authentic to themselves and being perceived as so by members because their being authentic depends on relational authenticity with the members. Authenticity is largely defined by what members see in leaders (Goffee & Jones, 2005). Unfortunately, many members are influenced by stereotypes.

Burris et al., (2014) found that employees generally perceived Asian leaders as competent but less authentic due to the stereotype of Asians being antisocial and passive. Cuddy et al., (2011) argue that warm behaviors enacted by a member of a stereotypically cold group (e.g., Asians) are

generally perceived as calculating and disingenuous, thus inauthentic. These findings suggest that leaders of color's statements and actions may not be interpreted in the ways they had intended by members and that the leadership burden rests on leaders of color to make members comfortable, hence, make themselves less authentic (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Ibarra (2015) calls this phenomenon "the authenticity paradox," where the more they try to be authentic, the more they behave inauthentically to conform to the strictures of authentic leadership.

Stereotypes and Perceptions of Asian Women Leaders (AWLs)

When trying to be authentic to self, many Asian women leaders encounter stereotypes and perceptions held by members.

Racial Stereotypes

The most detrimental stereotype that affects AWLs' leadership is the one about their leadership ability itself. Asians, both men and women, are stereotyped as lacking leadership capital (Akutagawa, 2014; Burris et al., 2014; Chin, 2020; Nakamura, 2019; Sy et al., 2017; Xin, 2004). This stereotype is a result of a constellation of many stereotypes regarding Asians, such as being nonassertive, submissive, passive, timid, nonconfrontational, and not charismatic. These stereotypes make a direct contrast with a successful leader prototype in the United States. Thus, Asians are frequently rated poorly on important leadership traits (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005).

Another stereotype that aggravates others' perceptions about Asians' leadership is related to their perceived sociability. Although Asians are stereotyped as hardworking, disciplined, and intelligent, they are also stereotyped as cold and inscrutable, lacking the ability to causally socialize, possessing emotional intelligence, and express warm feelings toward others (Burris et al., 2014; Fiske et al., 2002; Sy et al., 2017), which makes them disliked (Rosette et al., 2016).

Leslie (2009) suggests that Asians' perceived low ratings on warmth and sociability by others reflect the fact that they are considered more of a threat because of their positive stereotypes. As a result, others attempt to compensate for a threatened feeling by positioning Asians negatively.

This particular stereotype makes Asians unfit for leadership positions because perceived low sociability negatively affects others' perceptions of Asians' ability to build relationships, which is crucial for successful leadership. Feeling disliked, AWLs in Kawahara's (2007) study revealed that they were at a disadvantage in being elected. Likability significantly affects an election result. This may explain why many Asians lack representation in leadership positions in academia. In Chen et al.'s (2013) study, Asian immigrant scientists were prevented from attaining leadership positions due to their foreign social skills perceived by members. Colleagues in Ideta and Cooper's (2021) study described an AWL as "fond of embarrassing others" and "not getting along with staff" in her evaluation as a Dean. Again, perceptions matter.

Clearly, others perceive Asians' sociability negatively, which cements the view of Asians' lack of leadership capital. Confirming this view, Tinkler et al., (2019) revealed that undergraduate students rated AWLs to be the least fit for leadership. Although people generally perceive AWLs as highly competent (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002), their perceived lack of sociability disqualifies AWLs as effective leaders because likeability is crucial in maintaining relationship-oriented leadership and positive leader-member exchanges (Pinto et al., 2015). AWLs are, in sum, competent but disliked (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Fiske et al., 2002, 2006).

These stereotypes and perceptions pose significant barriers to AWLs' leadership. First, because they are perceived as lacking abilities to lead, AWLs frequently receive patronizing behaviors from both supervisors and subordinates. One AWL in Ideta and Cooper's

(2021) study was a frequent recipient of comments like: "(There are those that say), 'I want to be the one to help this minority rise to glory,' and there are those who look at you and (think) maybe you can't handle the job" (p. 136). These condescending comments highlight others' desire to control and dominate AWLs.

Second, it is not uncommon that members openly challenge and sabotage AWLs (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Bergsieker et al., 2010). An AWL in Roy's (2019) study was confronted with noncooperation and disrespect from her department faculty members. She attributed this to her stigmatized foreignness. An AWL in Kawahara's (2007) study met with open defiance from a subordinate: "I don't have to listen to you" (p. 27).

Third, when they are perceived as violating the nondominant and nonconfrontational stereotypes and acting assertively, AWLs often receive unfavorable reception, are harshly criticized (Williams, 2014), and receive backlash in a form of harassment (Rosette et al., 2016; Tinkler et al., 2019), leading to a chilly work environment. Because they are expected to behave in a passive and mild-tempered manner, acting in a controlling and assertive manner may be at odds with the expectations of Asian women and may become proscribed behaviors even when they occupy a leader-like role (Rosette et al., 2016). This phenomenon is known as stereotype violation, where Asians' counterstereotypical behavior (e.g., assertiveness) elicits negative emotions among outgroups, often leading to social sanctions and intense dislike toward individuals who display stereotype violation (Bligh, 2012). An AWL in Elsey's (2020) study was angry with the expectations the dominant group imposed upon her: "you have to be a certain type of Asian for [them] to like you, to commit to you, to elevate you" (p. 65). AWLs who do not fit the descriptive stereotype of being demur and subservient are often perceived as a "dragon lady"—a conniving, ruthless, predatory woman who manipulates others to satisfy her self-interests (Ono & Pham, 2009; Prasso, 2006).

Stereotypes constrain AWLs' leadership. When they act stereotypically, their leadership quality is questioned. On the contrary, when they violate stereotypes and display the leadership traits heralded by the mainstream, they are severely sanctioned and harassed.

Cultural Misunderstandings

Similarities positively influence others' perceptions and facilitate leader-member interactions (Randolph-Seng et al., 2016). When differences are vast, such as between Asia and the U.S., misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur. People may misinterpret Asians' cultural values in humility, such as not making eye contact, not showing emotional expressions, not asking personal questions, or not revealing their background in public, as antisocial (Burris et al., 2014). Chin (2020), for example, describes Western cultural values such as "speaking up" and "confronting" as being in opposition to the mandate of "don't be so brazen" and "promoting harmony" in Asian cultures.

Language differences also present misunderstandings. In general, Asian language speakers emphasize brevity, while English speakers prefer loquaciousness (Chin, 2020). Frequently, English speakers perceive Asian people's communication styles to be abrupt and rude. This perception occurs because of the cultural difference in discourse styles. English speakers shift from information already stated to information about to be given, while Asian language speakers jump back and forth and leave out detail, assuming this to be implicit between the two interlocutors (Wang, 2008). During intercultural interactions, cultural differences could lead to misinterpretations, which further affect the quality of interactions.

Harassment

Women leaders of color face condescension, isolation, dismissal, lack of validation or appreciation, and failure to receive due credit, exclusion, devaluation, illegitimacy, and marginalization (Mainah & Perkins, 2015; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Ospina & Foldy,

2009). AWLs further encounter harassment related to their cultures, languages, looks, and figures.

Language-related harassment is particularly common among AWLs whose native language is not English. An AWL in Hu's (2019) study, for example, received blatant denigration from her colleagues regarding her ability to write in English because she was not a native speaker of English. The same colleagues even checked her dissertation to confirm that she was really granted a Ph.D. degree. Another AWL met with one surprise look after another from state senators when she was introduced as the president of a community college (Hu, 2019) because she looked young. Roy (2019) also described AWLs feeling not being taken seriously because of their petite figures. One said, "Height has something to do with power" (P. 66). These AWLs' experiences prove that AWLs must navigate in a space where an unspoken assumption that women leaders of color, in general, and AWLs, in particular, are not welcomed in leadership positions (Chan et al., 2021) is normalized.

Leadership and Emotion

Since leadership is a process, members demonstrate their power to influence who leads and how they do so by "granting" leaders "claims" to leadership identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, leadership cannot be abstracted out of these embedded relations that involve the practices of domination and subordination (Chandler & Kirsch, 2017). In this sense, a leader-member relationship can be described as a flow of power-play for the position (Evans et al., 2013). This is where emotions come in. In social exchanges between leaders and members, leaders actively manage group emotions (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011) by displaying their own emotions. Simultaneously, members also display an array of emotions that influence interactions (Medler-Lirazl & Seger-Guttmann, 2017). Members' perceptions of a leader could evoke negative emotions, which influence the group's affective and trust climate (Dasborough et al.,

2009). This could further negatively affect the quality of leader-member relationships.

How members perceive leaders, therefore, makes a difference in what kinds of relationships leaders can build with members and how leaders and members are engaged in a power-play. Because "people's underlying assumptions, stereotypes, beliefs, and schemas influence the extent to which they view someone as a good leader (Chin, 2013, p. 236), leaders' ethnicity/race influence members' perceptions of leaders (Burris et al., 2014; Sy et al., 2010).

In the attempt to understand authentic leadership from the eyes of AWLs, paying attention to members' emotions in the context of leader-member interactions warrants merit. Emotion is an integral part of leading (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008; Medler-Lirazl & Seger-Guttmann, 2017). Although most research has focused on the impacts of leaders' emotions on members, members' emotions also affect leader-member interactions (Xu et al., 2014) as members are an integral part of the leadership equation. Medler-Lirazl and Seger-Guttmann (2017) found that members' displays of positive emotions are positively associated, whereas their displays of negative emotions are negatively associated with the quality of leader-member interactions. Therefore, members' emotions have profound implications for whether AWLs can build high-quality relationships with them.

My Journey Toward Authentic Leadership

As an AWL, I believe that my identities must be on display because who I am culturally and racially, what I think and feel, the beliefs and values that drive my actions, and how I connect with others all matter to the people I must influence (Hill & Lineback, 2011). Members' trust in me and their willingness to accept my influence depend on the qualities they see in me through the relationships I form with them (Hill & Lineback, 2011). However, when members stereotypically expect me to be passive and nonconfrontational, and misunderstand my

culture, building a high-quality relationship with them becomes challenging because stereotypes are inherently false, thus, I defy them. Therefore, my power to influence members diminishes.

The prescribed stereotypes surrounding AWLs naturally give members the wrong idea that they get to control and dominate AWLs in a leadership power-play. For example, receiving condescending remarks from members regarding my nonnative English is common. Zoe (a composite character of the collective women) said, "I'm trying hard to be sensitive to your needs for English." Daily, Ken (a composite character of the collective men) monitors the grammaticality of my sentences and utterances and announces my errors to me in a beam. Both Zoe and Ken characterized my use of English as "rude" and "abrupt," thus, "sounding mean." As research says, this is a typical cultural misunderstanding of how Asian people speak.

Negative emotions emerge when members find me in stereotype violation. Anger seems to be the most common reaction. One time, Zoe was angry at me when I asked her to explain a puzzling decision she had made. Instead of explaining, she yelled at me, "You just shut up!" I still vividly remember Ken's demanding voice right in front of me at my office, "Just do what I tell you to do!" when, with a legitimate rationale, I turned down his request to teach a class he wanted to teach. When I asked Zoe not to interrupt my utterances in a raised voice and told her that repeated behavior of such would be perceived as a way to dominate nonnative speakers, Zoe was furious. She went to the Dean and requested a different supervisor from me.

Anger is frequently followed by tears. For tears to be the most effective, they must be shed in front of my immediate supervisor. When I found out that Zoe had intentionally excluded me from attending a series of important meetings and simply asked her to explain why she excluded me, she cried, "My bad. This is why people don't like you." Another time, Zoe cried when I simply expressed my objection to her idea: "I don't feel respected." Crying in front of AWLs' immediate supervisors seems to be a weapon women use to

position themselves as victims while making AWLs the villainess.

Sometimes, anger escalates to rage. Compared to anger, rage is characterized as explosive, extreme, intense, and uncontrolled, often leading to destructive behavior. In my leadership experience, I witnessed rage one time. My evaluation of Ken's leadership as program coordinator was not positive. His program faculty also expressed concerns about the direction Ken was leading. So, I requested a meeting with Ken. During the meeting, as I brought up one concern after another gently, his face turned red. I could see he was enraged. All of a sudden, he left the meeting, shouting, "I DON'T NEED TO HEAR ANYMORE!" I saw a man's rage in front of my eyes.

The following day, Ken emailed a scathing letter about me to the Dean. The letter was actually addressed to me: "You must take MY input, appreciate MY leadership abilities because MINE is superior, cultivate your own, but by exactly tracing MINE, and not feel threatened by MY superb leadership skills!" Throughout the letter, Ken reiterated: "I AM A LEADER! EVERYBODY ADMIRES ME!" At that time, Ken was a non-tenured assistant professor while I was a tenured full professor, a university's distinguished research professor, and his department chair. My title, my position, and my reputation did not matter to Ken. To him, I was a petite Asian immigrant woman who spoke English with an accent and deserved punishment for having dared to confront him.

Anger could be shown in writing as well. Slay (2003) revealed that African American leaders who emphasized their racial identity were seen less positively than those who did not by colleagues. An explicit display of my racial and cultural identity was frequently met with strong opposition and resentment. In my 360 degree evaluation by my members, the following comments were made: "Her race and language can become a weapon for her. In the process, her targets get intimidated, dehumanized, and demeaned." One time, Ken sent a furious email to the members: "Why does everything need to

be about race, ethnicity, LGBTQ, etc? Why can't we just be humans?" It was clear that my display of authentic self (my embracing of racial and cultural being) bothered them and made them uncomfortable. Members' various forms of anger make it difficult for me to develop a trustworthy relationship with them.

When I witness anger and tears, I observe them keenly and try to ease their discomfort while acknowledging (only to myself) that their discomfort must have originated from my violating stereotypes. Because the power to create normative expectations as to what authenticity is or can be (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2011) lies in members, I do not participate in their anger game. I do not apologize for violating stereotypes. Instead, I try my best to find solutions to their discomfort while inviting them to engage with my authentic self, explaining why I do what I do in the way I do. In other words, showing vulnerability. This is against my cultural norms. I frequently feel like losing my authenticity and compromising my authentic leadership capital (Fine, 2017) by doing so. However, to make my cultural and racial ways of being and doing intelligible to members, I acknowledge that it is necessary. If I ask members to adapt to me, I myself must show my willingness to adapt to members. In this sense, members and I indeed play a game of control.

Members' reactions to my invitations vary and manifest their mental maturity level in interracial interaction. Interracial interactions are cognitively depleting to the dominant group (Richeson & Shelton, 2007) because they are forced to spend so much psychic energy trying not to appear prejudiced. This is cognitively demanding and exhausting. Some are willing to explore my racial and cultural authenticity, while some bluntly refuse to do so. Their unwillingness to engage in my authenticity indicates the level of their racial stamina (DiAngelo, 2022) that is required to continuously engage with racial and cultural others. When I tried to engage with Ken, he withdrew. Instead, he intentionally exposed his unhappiness to all and encouraged other members to follow him, which created a chilly

work environment for all. Zoe threatened to quit until she was assigned a different supervisor. When she did not get one, she quit. In this case, who won the game? I would have rather played a game of control with Ken and Zoe. Doing so could have been intellectually stimulating and mutually beneficial, expanding our cultural and racial horizons. Doing so could have made me a better leader.

Broader Implications for AWLs' Leadership

In the U.S., white professors comprise 67.6% followed by 12.4% of Asians, 9.9% of Latinx, 7.4% of African Americans, and 0.2% of indigenous populations. Asians' share in leadership positions, however, shrinks to 4.6% as department chairs (13.8% Latinx and 10.3% African Americans), 4.5% as academic deans (13.3% Latinx and 10.6% African Americans), and 4.5% as provosts (13.4% Latinx and 11.0% African Americans) (ZIPPIA Careers, 2022). Compared to other ethnically/racially minoritized groups, Asians are indeed invisible in leadership positions. This phenomenon is called the "bamboo ceiling," where Asians are highly qualified, yet lack representation or success in leadership positions (Hyun, 2005). The bamboo ceiling also affects corporate America. While Asians are heavily represented in corporate jobs, their presence drops off significantly at the senior administrator level, with Asian women experiencing a particularly severe drop at 80% (Chui, et al., 2022).

The challenges AWLs encounter are similar to those of other women leaders of color. Aggressive emotional expressions by members, however, seem to be unique to AWLs. Because the nonconfrontational and passive stereotype (positive stereotype) is so tenacious, any violation of it gives members a psychological shock. This is because positive stereotypes prescribe how AWLs should behave and create "ought expectancies" that are inherently evaluative (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Cropp et al., 2015). As a result, AWLs who defy stereotypes become an

easy target of punishment. Because AWLs are stereotyped as timid and passive, in other words, nonthreatening, to begin with, this increases the level of harassment. The harasser finds justification to do so because society expects AWLs to behave nonthreateningly. This type of nonchalant harassment can also be seen at school where Asian students are bullied the most (Huang & Vidourek, 2019). Harassment and punishment could involve schadenfreude which Nietzsche (1996) defines as deriving pleasure from another's misfortunes. As an enviously prejudiced group, Asians are more likely than other outgroups to be targets of schadenfreude (Cuddy et al., 2007). Asians' relatively weaker political power compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Kim & Lee, 2001) aggravates the level of harassment. In sum, bullying and harassing Asians is not considered as condemning as toward other groups and is frequently justified.

Cropp et al., (2015) further warn that positive stereotypes function as a uniquely powerful mode of perpetuating inequality and propping up traditional status hierarchies in which Asians are consistently disadvantaged. For example, given the perceived acceptability of positive stereotypes to perceivers, AWLs who disagree with and speak out against such blanket categorization may be perceived as hypersensitive complainers, thus discouraging future attempts to challenge stereotypes (Diebels & Czopp, 2011). Any AWLs who have dealt with member resistance understand how mentally exhausting it is. I felt mentally drained whenever Ken and Zoe openly made one complaint after another. It is much easier to comply with stereotypes rather than defy them. Doing so, however, ultimately destroys AWLs' authenticity. It presents a dilemma where AWLs must choose one leadership pathway from two choices, both impossible: losing authenticity by complying with stereotypes or keeping authenticity by defying stereotypes, but meeting with member resistance and harassment.

A stereotype constraint AWLs experience proves that race and gender intersect with each other to create a leadership dilemma specific to AWLs. AWLs' leadership is also uniquely intertwined with members' emotions, challenging individual AWLs' success and advancement in leadership. Influenced by historical context, social and cultural biases, and existing power structures, members assign racial and gender identities to AWLs. In this racialization process, members' emotions and feelings also become racialized, with the tenacious stereotypes about Asian women intertwining in the process. In turn, members' racialized affect (Berg & Ramos-Zayas, 2015) influences interpersonal interactions and power dynamics with AWLs negatively, leading to disrespect and distrust. Members' disrespect and distrust are both detrimental to leadership success. In sum, racialized affect becomes a powerful tool not only to constrain but also prevent AWLs from advancing in leadership. In this sense, it is not so much about the contents of the stereotypes per se but the racialized affect that these stereotypes evoke in members that leads to inequality in leadership success and advancement.

To break the bamboo ceiling, AWLs must use research and scholarship to advocate for themselves as a networking strategy. Although networking is generally not emphasized among Asians, it is a way to solidify a group's strength and advance their interests. AWLs' scholarship on their leadership experiences, frequently using autobiography and autoethnography, addresses the obstacles they face in leadership. It serves to extend the network of support to fellow unknown AWLs by validating their experiences as a collective and providing insights. This creates unique mentoring relationships through print. Fundamentally, it provides AWLs with access to a network of academic and professional contacts and information they may not know exists. This type of support is crucial for AWLs' leadership success because finding fellow AWL mentors is difficult due to the rigidly enforced "bamboo ceiling." The more AWLs' scholarship on leadership expands, the more fellow AWLs can expand their own network of support and begin to harbor "authentic feelings of liberation" (Chan

et al., 2021, p. 260). Reading stories that resonate and explain their own experiences will enable AWLs to develop a support network. It will motivate more AWLs to remain in or challenge themselves for leadership positions amidst an array of emotionally laden resistance they may receive from members. AWLs' scholarship, therefore, provides benefits to the entire AWL community.

AWL's leadership realities present implications for institutional change as well. According to Cropp et al., (2015), positive stereotypes offer a still accepted means for funneling Asians to domains they have traditionally occupied or to subtly communicate what society expects of them. Due to the strongly negative racialized affect evoked by the perceived dislikeness and antisocialness, many Asian women faculty have a hard time being elected and cannot advance themselves to a department chair. In most higher education institutions, being a department chair is the first entry point to being an administrator. This could be one reason why there are not many AWLs in administrative positions, functioning as gatekeepers to further the "bamboo ceiling." Society's funneling through positive stereotypes could also become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have met AWLs who have intentionally chosen administrative positions that do not require or require less member supervision, which inadvertently confirms that Asians lack social skills. The most detrimental factor is that, due to the stereotype of lacking leadership traits, AWLs are not expected to be leaders and are rarely provided with opportunities to advance to leadership. Women are typically not engaged in leadership early in their careers (Hanuum et al., 2015; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021) compared to men. Concerning AWLs, such an opportunity comes out of nowhere, and it is not the fulfillment of a pursuit so much as a serendipitous situation that presents itself (Hartlep, 2022). My becoming an administrator was indeed serendipitous. When I became a department chair by accident, I became the first Asian woman chair in the university's 130-year history. A lack of

leadership opportunity given to AWLs in higher education institutions is also a reflection of a model minority myth that Asians are well-represented, thus do not need special considerations for their advancement. Indeed, Asian women are rarely sponsored or mentored to be leaders by other leaders (Na & Kawahara, 2022).

For AWLs to enjoy successful leadership like other group members, current leaders in higher education must first acknowledge the reality of the underrepresentation of AWLs and thoroughly understand the mechanisms by which racialized affect, heavily intertwined with societal stereotypes about Asian women, functions to prevent AWLs from leading successfully. Without this knowledge, AWLs will not be able to receive culturally and racially responsive support from their supervisors. In other words, AWLs' supervisors must be accountable for developing inclusive leadership competency themselves. An opportunity to participate in leadership development must also be intentionally presented to AWLs. Ideally, such opportunities should include training specifically designed for Asian women leaders. Such training also leads to external networking benefits. Most importantly, current leaders in higher education must affirmatively acknowledge AWLs' leadership potential and be accountable for cultivating it. Unless society sees that the responsibility of breaking the bamboo ceiling lies in not only AWLs but also all others, it will continue to exist, hindering Asian women's advancement. Those of us who have made it to an Associate/Assistant/Vice Dean position against all odds bear a burden of breaking the bamboo ceiling ourselves, but we must also be vigilant that others do the same.

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Contents

Beyond Optics: uBuntu Leadership as counter perspective to Performative Allyship

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Abstract

This paper explores uBuntu leadership as an ethical and community-rooted alternative to the performative allyship increasingly prevalent in ostensibly social justice-oriented educational spaces. Drawing from African philosophy, legal history, and personal narrative, the author challenges Western hierarchical leadership models that privilege individualism over collective well-being. Through the lens of uBuntu, the paper argues for a relational, restorative, and nonlinear approach to institutional change. By critiquing tokenism, performative gestures, and superficial solidarity, this work re-centers leadership as a practice of service, humility, and genuine community engagement, arguing that we must move beyond optics to restore trust and transformative equity in higher education.
        Keywords: *uBuntu, Leadership, Higher Education*

Introduction and Historical Frame

Education—whether in the primary, secondary, or post-secondary space—has long served as a site of resistance. For nearly two centuries, lawsuits over access to education have reflected shifts in the political climate, oscillating between liberal and conservative ideals. For example, shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865, the 14th Amendment was passed in 1868, followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed equal rights to Black people in hotel accommodations, public transportation, theaters, and other public spaces (McPherson, 1965). Yet by 1883, a series of lawsuits challenging the act were consolidated, and the Supreme Court struck down the 1875 Act. The Court ruled that it applied only to state action—not to private acts of discrimination—laying the legal groundwork for the Jim Crow era (Mack, 1999).

In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* solidified the "separate but equal" doctrine. While the law claimed to allow equality through separation, the lived reality was far from equal. From 1896 to 1954, the Black community fought—and died—for the right to equal education. Even after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the United States resisted integration. Still, social justice advocates pressed forward, securing landmark policies such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Title IX in 1972, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.

One might ask: Why begin this chapter with a legal history lesson? The answer lies in uBuntu—an African philosophy rooted in community and nonlinear time, where the past, present, and future are interconnected and mutually informing (Praeg, 2008). In the late 1400s, Spain, England, and Portugal launched colonial and imperial conquests (Engerman, 1998; McAlister, 1984). Imperialism led to chattel slavery, leaving an indelible historical imprint that continues to shape U.S. society. From slavery to colonization, through emancipation and the ongoing struggle for civil rights, despite broken 14th Amendment promises, our national history has been one of resistance and resilience. Because of this history,

disenfranchised and marginalized populations are still fighting for equality.

uBuntu as a Leadership Framework

A social justice and equity-minded officer guided by uBuntu can transform institutional culture through relational ethics, restorative justice, and collective accountability. As an academic executive leader at a Research 1 institution, I recognize that higher education has faced a series of high-profile scandals that have eroded public trust. The admissions scandal, in which wealthy parents paid for their children's admissions into elite universities, exposed an unethical system where wealth, not merit, determined access (Korn & Levitz, 2020). Likewise, the sexual abuse scandals at Ohio State, Michigan State, and Baylor University point to structural and leadership failures that allowed misconduct to flourish unchecked (Forsyth, 2018; Perkins Coie LLP, 2019; Terribilini, 2019).

These events signal a broader leadership crisis in higher education—a space where some powerful figures embezzle funds, bully colleagues, and undermine institutional integrity (Frank et al., 2015; Harahap & Isgiyarta, 2023; Hollis & Yamada, 2021). Ncube (2010), building on Bekker (2007), posits that such crises can be addressed through uBuntu leadership, which fosters values-based, ethical decision-making and reduces contradictions within organizational life. The term originates from the Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele languages and represents a worldview in which one's identity and purpose are shaped through relationships with others (Ncube, 2010, p. 79). uBuntu embodies foundational principles of care, mutual respect, and communication obligation within African cultural epistemologies (Bekker, 2008; Mangaliso, 2001; Ncube, 2010). In the uBuntu tradition, the interconnectedness of people and communities sustains and empowers ethical leadership.

This inclusive worldview offers a powerful foundation for diversity officers and social justice practitioners, who are often called to operate within hierarchical institutions. Rather than imposing a Western, top-down management style, uBuntu-informed leadership embraces a collaborative, community-engaged approach. With its nonlinear temporal framework, uBuntu calls on leaders not only to learn from the past but to actively apply those lessons in service of the present community—and in preparation for a more equitable future (Ncube, 2010).

Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market-based logic, competition, and privatization, further complicates ethical leadership (Cerny et al., 2005; Titolo, 2012). This perspective encourages institutions to adopt business-like behaviors such as prioritizing rankings, brand management, and donor appeasement over communal well-being. Under neoliberal pressures, leaders focus increasingly on risk aversion; in higher education, we see this in the escalating drive to track and enhance enrollments, seek multimillion donor gifts, and the brand enhancement garnered through big-time athletics. Further, the boards of trustees typically are guided by businessmen, not educators (Harris et al., 2023). Hence, presidents of any institution must acquiesce to such guidance to maintain their position. The neoliberal focus is trained on acquisition, not equity. This paradigm erodes trust with community partners and reduces relationships to transactions. Even equity initiatives become commodified and packaged into grant proposals or diversity brochures to appeal to funders, rather than shaped through genuine collaboration. In contrast, uBuntu rejects this transactional ethos, insisting that relationships, instead of returns, are the foundation of leadership.

Through the lens of uBuntu, leadership becomes a collective endeavor. While a leader operating within a Western hierarchical model may prioritize structural authority, status, or ego-driven control, uBuntu-inspired leadership emphasizes shared safety, humility, and collaborative problem-solving. Leadership, in this view, is not about asserting power—sustaining

community well-being remains the primary focus.

uBuntu, Hegemony, and the Fight for Equity

The aforementioned historical benchmarks form the foundation of the ongoing fight for equity and continue to impact society due to the hegemonic shift that occurred with the fall of the Ottomans (Emordi, 2024; Mather, 2014). The rise of imperialism—and the indoctrination of communities of color around the globe by European powers—still shapes our societal and institutional structures, which remain steeped in Western individualistic values (Bazzi et al., 2024). These values uphold a dominant culture over a collective and marginalized culture (Glass & Rud, 2012; Hopper, 2017).

In this milieu, the social justice–oriented, equity-minded leader (EML) must navigate these historical legacies to forge an inclusive pathway for both students and colleagues. In truth, EMLs are born of—and serve—their communities. Despite a history that has worked to unravel society's ethical cohesion, we remain committed to fairness, parity, and self-determination for all people. With that in mind, the EML advances their work on behalf of those who have been overlooked or forgotten.

To clarify uBuntu, Cossa (2023) writes, "While in uBuntu a community is not made of individuals because the perception of the individual is absent in [the] uBuntu world; individuals comprise community in humanism" (p. 40). Further, Cossa (2023, p. 40) restates Mbiti (1995): "Literally, the motto [for uBuntu] means 'a person is a person unto/through/because of persons' (not others), thus rendering both the singular and the 'othering' obsolete by not allowing the definition of personhood through self/individuality." Applying uBuntu specifically to EMLs, I posit that these colleagues exist because the community exists—because the community is, and because the community continually strives to be recognized and respected.

At its heart, this is the spirit of uBuntu: the foundation from which the EML forges a path—not only for their own leadership, but also for colleagues, communities, and those marginalized or silenced by institutional structures. The equity-minded person is because of the community—is, are, and becomes through that community. Without the people and without their ongoing resistance, the EML's purpose diminishes significantly.

To survive daily hypocritical leadership, EML professionals must rely on coping strategies and seek out communities of support. These supports often include trusted peer networks within or across institutions, affinity groups or caucuses within professional associations, therapy or coaching with culturally competent providers, and informal community circles rooted in shared identity or values. For example, Zammit and Vickers (2017) discuss equity buddies as a supportive structure that can be applied to the higher education space. Leaders can infuse support into the department structure with an ombuds presence and mentoring for junior faculty (Hollis, 2017). These mechanisms not only offer emotional relief but also use a community-minded approach to sustain integrity in the face of institutional contradiction.

Western Individualism as an Obstacle to uBuntu

The current historical moment, marked by ongoing attacks on equity work under the 47th presidential administration, leaves many—especially those educated in Western traditions—vulnerable to acquiescing to the United States' long-standing ideology of rugged individualism (Bazzi et al., 2020). This individualistic perspective gained traction during the nation's westward expansion—a campaign rooted in the violent removal of Indigenous nations who had occupied those lands for centuries (Perdue & Green, 2007). As history affirms, Western expansion also relied on the exploitation of Mexican and Asian laborers (Takaki, 2023).

This hypocrisy is foundational: individualism is often presented as a virtue, yet it has historically enabled colonialism and imperialism by decimating communities and cultures. The Western ideal of succeeding at any cost rarely accounts for who is sacrificed when communities are displaced. From its founding, the United States rejected British oppression only to adopt similar tactics of disenfranchisement—targeting Indigenous peoples, African descendants, Asian populations, and Mexican communities. Rugged American individualism has always relied on the labor of Black and Brown people from across the globe.

Aligned with the Industrial Revolution, this ethos fractured families and communities through mass migration, as individuals left home in search of work. The consequences were structural: eminent domain displaced entire neighborhoods to make way for highways and high-priced housing developments, severing communal roots in the name of progress. Yet resistance endured. The storied protests of the late 1960s catalyzed the development of Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, and Chicano Studies programs, alongside the establishment of cultural centers for students (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). In response, colleges introduced multicultural and diversity offices to address the needs of underserved students (Muñoz, 1997; Rojas, 2010). Specialized support programs were also founded to improve access for students from historically marginalized racial backgrounds. TRIO initiatives, summer bridge programs, and equity-minded educational interventions such as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) created new pathways for success (White et al., 1998).

However, like most Western bureaucracies, these structures were implemented with hierarchical systems of power. Those at the top held decision-making authority, while frontline staff who were often more connected to the students, were relegated to middle and lower ranks. Consequently, they were left to perform essential service work under rigid institutional control.

Performative Leadership

At times, leaders who ascend the career ladder through equity and diversity spaces subscribe to performative allyship—appearing to support student services and diversity work while remaining self-centered in their grounding. These individuals may speak out against injustice, but their concern lies more with the appearance of solidarity than with doing the actual work (Kalina, 2020). Performative activists often position themselves as moral leaders, posturing as champions of justice without taking meaningful risks or actions (Bartholomew, 2015). Researchers describe this posture as "slacktivism"—a tokenized display of support that serves one's image but offers little substantive progress toward justice (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Morozov, 2009). These leaders may align themselves with institutional power not to create change, but to bolster their own position—often at the expense of others. In contrast, a community-centered or uBuntu-inspired leader remains accessible, engaged, and humble. They listen to colleagues' concerns, offer genuine support, and do not view compassion or care as beneath their position.

Performative allyship becomes especially evident through symbolic gestures. A leader might craft an email signature with an inspirational quote or fill their office with rainbow flags and social justice posters. Yet when a rising leader of color visits, that same performative ally might say, "I never saw you as a leader…" Or, while publicly celebrating cultural symbols, they schedule required events during Eid, Juneteenth, or Passover—signaling a lack of true cultural awareness (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023).

Performative intentions also emerge when a leader publicly denounces distant tragedies, such as a shooting or hate crime, yet fails to address racist or sexist comments in the very meetings they facilitate. By prioritizing optics over meaningful intervention, they lose the trust of those around them. Organizational peers and colleagues quickly recognize the ally's gestures as self-serving rather than sincere.

The same performative dynamic emerges in token hiring. Bringing in skilled, diverse colleagues can raise hopes across a department. But when the hire is publicly sidelined or unsupported, the community sees the truth: it was never about change—it was about appearance. The new hire becomes a "hood ornament" rather than a valued agent of transformation. In these contexts, the ally's individual image remains the central concern, while the community becomes an afterthought—if considered at all.

Emotional Labor Under Performative Leadership

Social justice–minded colleagues often find themselves embattled—working to support the very systems that hired them while simultaneously deflecting community concerns about those systems' performative behaviors. When an institution publicly presents itself as inclusive but privately operates through favoritism and tokenism, the broader community may question its true commitment and integrity. This questioning often serves two purposes: first, to determine whether the EML is naively moving through the organization without recognizing its performativity; and second, to assess whether the EML holds any actual authority within the illusion of inclusion.

Performative leadership, in this context, advances superficial commitments that fail to dismantle discrimination or bring about meaningful structural change (Stephenson, 2024). The most egregious harm arises when a member of a marginalized group places their trust in a performative leader—only to discover that the trust was misplaced. In such situations, individuals may make personal and professional decisions under the illusion of support, only to find that the hope was both manufactured and fragile.

For diversity and social justice professionals who remain aligned with community needs while simultaneously witnessing the performativity of executive leadership, the experience can result in sheer exhaustion. When unit and division heads are more committed to public image than genuine engagement, the social justice–minded officer walks a delicate line—attempting to uphold the community's trust while deflecting undeserved criticism from higher-ups. Caught between performative supervisors and authentic commitments to equity, EMLs endure a unique form of emotional labor. They are often forced to smile through duplicity, using subtle strategies to preserve truth without provoking backlash (Hochschild, 1983; Weeks et al., 2024).

This duplicity generates intense stress. Pretending to agree with hypocritical actions, offering inauthentic affirmations, or suppressing dissent leads not only to physical symptoms—such as fatigue or tension—but also to deteriorating morale and well-being (Grandey et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2014). To survive daily hypocritical leadership, EML professionals must rely on coping strategies and seek out communities of support (Weeks et al., 2024). Without these, the emotional toll of performative leadership can become unsustainable.

Tenure, Solitude, and the Contradiction of Academic Community

Ideologically, the conflation of Western higher education structures and the African philosophy of uBuntu creates a confounding position for those of African descent who pursue their professional paths through community-based values. Much like the rugged individualism ingrained in American culture, the pursuit of tenure in higher education is rooted in a similar ethic of solitude.

Colleagues often conduct research in solitude, starting with their undergraduate years, continuing through graduate school, and intensifying along the tenure track. Academics are trained in quiet carrels and libraries, behind closed doors, weaving together the publication record that will determine their professional survival. The tenure dossier is, by design, a solitary pursuit: it reflects an individual body of work. The second-, fourth-, and sixth-year

reviews assess a candidate's progress as an isolated case.

Given these norms, academics understandably develop an ego-invested posture in their scholarship and prestige. Research 1 institutions promote social norms that encourage sustained autonomy. Ironically, that same solitude leaves faculty vulnerable—picked off one by one—should political or economic threats arise. The rigor of the work does not inherently create isolation, but the structural individualism required to sustain that rigor consistently often severs scholars from their communities and families.

Samuels, G.E.M. (2026 in press) captures this disconnection through a student's story regarding her father's pursuit of tenure:

> I [the student] remember when my dad was going up for tenure. We never saw him in the years before he went up; and really, not for most of my childhood, because he was working full-time while trying to get his Ph.D. We had moved for his new job. My sisters and I had to change schools, make new friends. My mom had to get a new job. He was stressed all the time. Writing books or papers. Going to conferences. Teaching. But then, he didn't get tenure, so it was like he got fired. He had to leave, and we had to move again. (Samuels, 2025, in press).

The Western tenure process fractures the family unit through the isolating demands of academic achievement. If immediate family members miss time with their parent/scholar, extended family, community institutions, and civic engagement also lose touch. The scholar becomes detached, sacrificing decades in pursuit of a goal that may ultimately elude them.

An uBuntu-based approach to tenure would fundamentally reshape how institutions assess scholarly contributions, not merely as the isolated output of an individual (Sasso et al., 2024), but as part of a broader ecosystem of mentorship, collaboration, and community impact. Rather than relying solely on traditional metrics such as solo-authored publications or grant dollars, uBuntu-informed tenure systems might also elevate co-authored work, service to marginalized communities, and collective initiatives that uplift underrepresented scholars and students.

In contrast, collective action occurring through unions or faculty governance, can protect scholars from these individual vulnerabilities. When a group petitions leadership or garners community attention through media and advocacy, it pressures institutions to listen. This community-driven accountability counters the isolating ethos of the academy.

Throughout my career, I have resisted hierarchical structures that separate administrators from the people they serve. Even before I had the language of uBuntu, I embraced service and humility. My leadership philosophy centers on helping others identify their talents, supporting their development goals, and removing barriers so they can thrive. This reflects what the literature calls servant leadership, and it aligns closely with uBuntu.

uBuntu-style leadership encourages shared vision and collective decision-making. It resists top-down edicts from those high on the organizational chart (Ncube, 2010). Instead, this vantage point fosters genuine care, respect, and humanity in workplace relationships. As a scholar of workplace bullying, I have long observed how leadership shapes culture (Hollis, 2019). The benevolence of uBuntu can counteract aggression, elevate morale, and restore dignity to the academic environment (Mangaliso, 2001).

uBuntu: Past, Present, and Future

I reflect on my own leadership with deep respect for the ancestral models I've inherited—my father, uncles, grandmother, and my mother, who continues to inspire as an educator. One morning in my youth, my family sat around the breakfast table listening to the local news. The announcement came: "And last night, the school board brought a vote to fire Dr. Levi Hollis."

We froze.

We had just moved to this new town and were still adjusting to a predominantly white school district that wasn't always welcoming. My father, a rising star in secondary education, was determined and tireless. But in that moment, we realized we were just two votes away from losing our home. We never spoke of that moment again, not even 45 years later. But I learned what happened: it was the Black community that saved my father's job. Black churches, the NAACP, and the Black United Service Club had shown up to defend the district's first Black administrator. We were, we are, and we will be because of the community.

My father led with compassion. He visited some of the teachers in his district on weekends. He created alternative education centers for students at risk of dropping out. His leadership always embraced the disenfranchised. He existed by, through, and for the community. To this day, 35 years after his death, people still approach my mother to speak about Levi Hollis. He and my mother embodied community service. They created a Minority Scholars Club and helped students navigate college applications and scholarships. My uncles did the same by showing young people how discipline, grit, and pride could help them build futures beyond paycheck-to-paycheck survival. Though we never used the word uBuntu, we lived it.

In my current role as Associate Dean, I begin meetings by saying, "I am one of the faculty. I am part of this community." My position on the organizational chart may grant me a different set of responsibilities or access, but it does not separate me from care, connection, or concern for my colleagues. Instead of wielding authority, I ask, "How can I help you?" I check in on colleagues' parents, children—even pets—not as a performance, but as an extension of genuine care. While some competitive leaders may question this empathetic approach, they often overlook its deeper power. When people feel seen and valued, they are more likely to bring their best work to the table. This may not be the dominant model across academia, but I

have found that community-based leadership fosters more lasting progress than top-down, transactional management. Or, as I consider the ancestral wisdom from my grandmother: "You get more with honey than vinegar."

Nonetheless, uBuntu offers a compelling approach for framework; however, its embodiment includes nuances associated with multi-dimensional leaders whose identities sit at the nexus of intersectionality. A leader's positionality along gender, class, and racial lines can impact how interpersonal professional relationships evolve. Even within Black communities, strata exist in association with colorism, classism, and privilege (Hollis, 2024). These markers inform how leaders evolve within their communities (Johnson, 2021). uBuntu does not erase these tensions, but it equips leaders with a perspective to transcend these positional markers to engage systems from a place of care.

uBuntu in Practice

Operating in the community, of the community, through the community, and because of the community requires quiet self-reflection (Cossa, 2023). It requires leaders to examine how they function in collaboration—not through dominance, but through ethical engagement. Embracing ethical priorities over hierarchical performance metrics is essential. For example, in my role, I am often tasked with designing educational programs that highlight faculty work and serve the broader community. At one point, our team was mandated to host a specific number of events. However, before one of those events, a faculty member experienced a sudden death in his family. He returned home mid-semester to support his loved ones and prepare for the burial. Though the college approved his time away, he returned quickly, still grieving—and yet, eager to fulfill his event commitment.

Technically, I could have insisted he continue with the scheduled program. We had a quota to meet, and I had made promises. But I recognized his grief. He needed space to focus on his classes and navigate the emotional weight of

his return. I remembered when I lost my own father and the subsequent grace my professors extended to me as I stumbled through my senior year of college. The kindness my professors offered me over 30 years ago allowed me to complete my senior thesis.

In that moment, my past informed my present. My team and I protected the faculty member's dignity and gently encouraged him to postpone the event. That is uBuntu—where past, present, and future inform one another. I trust that, someday, he will extend the same grace to another colleague in need.

In other parts of my work, I have seen how this historical moment has left many faculty and staff feeling dejected and isolated. The threats to higher education have paralyzed international students and those relying on support systems to navigate a Western, hegemonic culture. A few colleagues and I recognized the need to bolster community unity. Together, we developed mentorship programs and leadership forums to rebuild connection. In collaboration with faculty, we created an open space to process our fears and frustrations under the current presidential administration. We did not topple the emerging United States presidential oligarchy, but in that space, something grew—something like a purple crocus pushing through the last snow of winter.

The uBuntu approach can also assuage burgeoning scandals and unethical behavior. As financial austerity continues to challenge higher education, the propensity for desperate and questionable behavior to sustain or advance a position can enter the workspace. uBuntu can guide leadership responses to organizational crises before such occurs through its emphasis on relational accountability, deep ethical listening, and community-rooted decision-making. In practice, this means proactively creating environments where harm is less likely to occur in the first place. For instance, rather than waiting for a scandal to erupt or a grievance to be filed, uBuntu-inspired leaders regularly convene inclusive dialogues, encourage open channels of feedback, and assess policies for equity implications. Fostering trusting communication

before problems arise not only is good leadership practice, but it also supports a structure of transparency preventative strategies might include peer mentoring networks, transparent hiring and promotion practices, and restorative circles to address tensions before they escalate into conflict. When harm does occur, the uBuntu approach encourages public acknowledgment, collective healing, and action that centers those impacted—not institutional reputation. By embedding relational ethics into the DNA of leadership, uBuntu provides both a compass and a shield, ensuring that institutional integrity is upheld not through performance, but through authentic connection.

Transformative leadership embraces tenderness over titles, obligation over optics, and people before power. In that community-based event—created by us, for us—we found hope and began to heal. That hope called the community back together again after commencement. We moved forward—as a community. In a nonlinear way. In the uBuntu way.

Recommendations

With an uBuntu perspective in mind, these recommendations are generated to foster community cohesion, but not at all meant to diminish academic rigor. The focus does not dismantle what we do as scholars but reflects on how to shift the process to yield support for scholars at any level.

1. **Reframe Evaluation Metrics:** Modify performance and promotion criteria to value collaboration, community engagement, and relational ethics—emphasizing how work is done, not just what is produced. Interdisciplinary and civic partnerships, which often match the institutions' mission, can also empower innovation.

2. **Foster Community Accountability:** Establish peer mentoring circles, restorative feedback practices, and

inclusive decision-making bodies that reflect shared responsibility and dismantle top-down isolation. Though colleges and universities are steeped in neoliberal approaches from executive administration, faculty can still operate in teams beyond search committees but do so in managing program and department culture. Collaboration on standard operating practices in these smaller units can bolster that unit's culture.

3. Model Ethical Leadership Daily:
   Encourage individuals, regardless of rank, to lead with empathy, check on colleagues, and create spaces of belonging. Small acts of care become structural resistance when practiced consistently. Specifically, such practices include congratulating achievements and more so, championing group projects and team initiatives that embrace students, pre-tenure and tenured faculty. Incentives for teamwork and collaboration demonstrate the department's community-centered preferences.

Conclusion

Leadership emerges not from titles, but from daily acts of courage, care, and accountability. uBuntu teaches that leaders do not act alone—they lead through community, shaped by the people who walk with them. When institutions favor optics over ethics, communities bear the cost. However, leaders who operate with a shared purpose and relational ethics open the door to collective healing.

For uBuntu-minded approaches to be sustainable and not merely symbolic, institutions would need to adopt more community-centered approaches. This means embedding uBuntu not just in mission statements but explicitly adopting community-oriented processes for fiscal matters, decision-making and personnel accountability at all levels. Institutions can minimize racism, sexism, and xenophobia through community-based practices; further evaluating the institutions through this lens can sustain productive and inclusive pathways. Additionally, organizations can evaluate leaders not only on outcomes, but on how they build trust and tend to community well-being. Structural uBuntu demands policy reforms that value equity-minded labor as core to the institution's functioning. When an uBuntu minded community process is codified into an institution's culture it can foster anti-oppressive change.

Throughout this paper, uBuntu has served as more than a framework—it has grounded a practice of resistance against performative allyship and bureaucratic hierarchy. This approach reclaims leadership as a communal act, one rooted in history, compassion, and action. The call remains clear: remember who we serve, who stands with us, and who still waits to be seen.

In this era of retreating equity and performative gestures, uBuntu offers a path forward—nonlinear, interdependent, and deeply human. Equity work must move beyond performance. The moment demands a promise—one shaped by truth, carried by community, and guided by care.

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