Interest Convergence and Neoliberalism: Effects on Entry-Level Staff of Color Who Perform Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

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The University of San Francisco

Interest Convergence and Neoliberalism: Effects on Entry-Level Staff of Color Who Perform Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER of ARTS
in
Organization and Leadership

By
Jesse N. Avila

(Spring 2023)
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(Faculty Advisor / Instructor)

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DEDICATION

Due to systemic racism and other forms of structural oppression, this thesis is dedicated to all staff of color who perform(ed) diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.
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ABSTRACT

Higher education was not originally built to benefit people of color. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are many ways in which universities seek to change higher education. However, higher education has a staff retention problem and is at risk of losing more than half of its current workforce. Retention problems also impact entry-level staff of color who perform DEI in universities. Through a lens of interest convergence and neoliberalism, this qualitative study gathered the experiences of entry-level staff of color who perform DEI in student affairs, looked at how their experiences are shaped by the structures of the university, and examined the relationship between university structures and racism that affected entry-level staff of color. Participants in this study consisted of six current entry-level staff of color from three public Hispanic Serving Institutions in California. The findings from this study contributed to the limited research on entry-level staff of color performing DEI in higher education. The experiences revealed by the participants are organized into six themes: (1) identities influenced DEI positions, (2) joy experienced by performing DEI, (3) value found in supervisors with similar identities, (4) funding insecurities harm DEI staff, (5) budget cuts impact DEI initiatives, and (6) racism often experienced in university structures. Findings suggest entry-level staff of color are at the crossroads of working in environments which embrace their marginalized identities yet are situated in institutions that have made all participants think about resigning due to the oppressive treatment they systematically endure while performing DEI. Recommendations were developed from findings, which include practices in how universities can retain entry-level staff of color who perform DEI, and suggestions for future research to include entry-level staff of color and their experiences in higher education.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Higher education, like other industries, was built largely on slavery and other marginalized communities. Higher education is also often framed as giving those with the best chances in life an opportunity to succeed and become future leaders. Yet, it is taken for granted that higher education is a meritocracy, in which a person’s intellectual capabilities or test scores provide them access to the best universities. However, due to race and racism, higher education was not originally intended for people of color. Today, as higher education diversifies with the goal of granting people of color access to meritocracy through government bills, commissions, court cases, and affirmative action, many issues such as microaggressions, equal access, and the struggle for racial integration remain pervasive in higher education (Museus & Smith, 2016). Additionally, not only are students of color marginalized within universities, as they are not afforded the same experiences as their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2004), but also staff of color becomes marginalized within the same structures (Steele, 2018).

Institutions may seek to address these issues that affect people of color in higher education through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI are the core principles guiding some universities’ actions, policies, and visions as they seek to build an inclusive campus climate and make all feel welcomed and heard. Yet, DEI is occurring amidst major budget constraints and resistance from upper management. To support students of color, faculty and staff of color are needed (Kezar et al, 2008). Representation of faculty and staff of color becomes a valuable resource in uplifting and retaining marginalized students, as students feel comfortable approaching faculty and staff members who look like them (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). Hiring people of color is often a central goal of DEI and is another way higher education seeks to be
more inclusive to students of color. However, higher education has a staff retention issue (Bichsel et al., 2021). For example, in my entry-level staff position working at a multicultural center in higher education for six years, I have had seven supervisors. A lack of a consistent supervisor has harmed my growth within the institution as staff of color in my situation do not have the opportunity to build an ongoing relationship with their immediate supervisor. A lack of a consistent supervisor has caused me to feel unheard, undervalued, overworked, and lose passion for the work I do. In validating my experiences, research has shown staff of color are not valued (Bazner, 2021; Magolda, 2017; Steele, 2021), endure racism and microaggressions (Steel, 2021; Townsend 2021), and are marginalized by higher education in terms of the resources allocated to support staff of color (Steele, 2021). Thus, as the representation of staff of color is important to DEI in terms of retaining students, more research on the experiences of entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work is needed.

**Statement of the Problem**

DEI initiatives are a key component of an inclusive campus climate for students of color. Creating cultural resource centers, safe spaces to congregate, allocating resources effectively, implementing DEI strategic plans, and implementing new diversity staff positions are some solutions to build a diverse and inclusive campus climate. However, a lack of funding and budget cuts prohibits DEI from existing, and even worse, makes DEI programs to be misleading and superficial (Patton et al., 2019). To advance diversity, it is often said that interest convergence is needed, which means those in power must align with those who are marginalized to achieve equity (Bell, 1980). However, interest convergence still often benefits those in power more than those who are marginalized. Thus, it is said to be an interest *divergence* for marginalized groups which is how people of color continue to experience a lack of inclusion (Willner, 2019).
Unfortunately, DEI programs look very good for an institution, but they rarely achieve equitable outcomes for people of color.

To advance DEI in higher education, the work often falls on the staff of color’s shoulders. Some staff take it upon themselves to build up staff collectives or community-building spaces (Steele, 2021), while some focus on leadership or supervision style in order to uplift and bring value to one another and their students (Rheanna, 2021; Steele, 2021). Yet, they are marginalized by the structures of the institution. Staff are overworked and are charged a tax with the invisible labor, often unpaid, needed to advance DEI (Bazner, 2021; Bichel et al., 2022; Jones & Kee, 2021; Steele, 2018; Townsend, 2021). Thus, there is a need to highlight how organizational structures significantly shape the experiences of staff of color who are in entry-level DEI positions. Lastly, the voices of entry-level staff of color are missing in higher education and so it becomes important to give them a platform to highlight their experiences navigating institutions plagued by budgetary crises and systemic racism.

**Background and Need**

Today, higher education institutions operate with three primary and simultaneous goals in mind, known as the “iron triangle” of higher education. The three goals are institutional access (which can be interpreted as diversity), a high academic profile (merit-based ideology), and capital (or a stream of revenue). The iron triangle is a belief that all three goals are important to the institution; however, organizations often hedge resources toward one goal over the others in times of need (Jaquette et al., 2016). Usually, higher education chooses to focus on revenue and academic profile over access and diversity (Jaquette et al., 2016). A high academic profile makes the campus valuable, and during a budget crisis, costs associated with higher education increase. Unfortunately, these two sides of the triangle harm students as some marginalized students
simply cannot afford the rising costs associated with higher education like application fees, tuition, or the cost of living next to universities. While research has largely focused on students becoming marginalized by these competing goals, models like the iron triangle have not been studied in terms of how entry-level staff of color who perform DEI are also affected and marginalized when institutions seek profits or are challenged by budget cuts.

There are many factors impacting entry-level staff of color. As higher education is constantly challenged by budget cuts, institutions of higher education rescind resources from staff, which often include professional development opportunities or raises. Staff of color are also usually not the primary benefits of professional development (Bazner, 2021). Furthermore, DEI agendas often rely on the staff of color to implement the initiatives, but these agendas do not necessarily address staff needs and concerns. And while budget constraints impact the DEI work in student affairs, student affairs also seek to limit spending and consolidate the resources they offer. The division of student affairs in higher education has been downsizing since 2005 and has embraced staff attrition (Romano et al, 2010). When student affairs are affected by budget cuts, staff also lack the training to seek out donations or how to properly fundraise for their department or initiatives. Thus, as higher education seeks to consolidate resources by implementing budget cuts, this also limits the work staff of color can actually perform for DEI when students are demanding more resources. On top of day-to-day limitations, budget cuts also play a role in the staff of color being overworked and burned out, reducing morale.

Much of the existing literature in higher education focuses on faculty and mid-level staff of color reporting issues of belonging, being overworked, being taxed by the invisible labor with no additional compensation, and being challenged with microaggressions. Unfortunately, there is not enough literature capturing the experiences of entry-level staff of color performing DEI work
and how they are impacted by the structures of higher education, student affairs organization, and budgets in general. This study seeks to acquire more knowledge on these entry-level staff of color and the issues imposed upon them by organizational structures.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to document the experiences of entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work and to determine how broader socio-political factors, like race and racism and organizational structures, impact both the staff and the DEI work they perform. Entry-level staff of color experience institutional harm and their voices are rarely recorded. Thus, this study seeks to highlight their experiences through narrative inquiry and counternarratives. Furthermore, these harms can cause staff retention issues and negatively impact the larger campus community. When universities cannot retain staff, this burden impacts the campus on all fronts and hinders the mission of DEI within those universities. After conducting this study, the expected outcomes will illustrate a collective narrative from the voices of marginalized entry-level staff of color who perform DEI. The staff perspectives are critical in understanding how DEI is constructed across universities, and their narratives are essential to look at how they are marginalized in the way universities do business.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do marginalized entry-level staff of color performing DEI describe their student affairs experience?
2. How are these experiences shaped by university structures, which include: funding, budget cuts, supervision, gentrification, and staff attrition within their department?
3. Lastly, to what extent does a relationship exist between university structures and racism impacting marginalized entry-level staff of color?

**Limitations of the Study**

This is a qualitative study focusing on a small number of entry-level staff of color and thus findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of experiences by the entry-level staff of color performing DEI work. Additionally, time was a significant limitation in this study as the time only allowed for six participants to be interviewed. Lastly, there is a grey line in who is considered entry-level or mid-level in higher education, and for the purpose of this study, it mainly focused on those who transitioned immediately from receiving their B.A. degree to working full-time in DEI positions.

**Significance to the Field**

Universities often say staff play an important role in higher education. Yet, universities embrace staff attrition in times of budget crises. Unfortunately, this contradiction may suggest higher education only values staff when there are enough resources for them. Furthermore, entry-level staff are often left out of work-related, organizational conversations, and they are not a primary focus of academic research. Thus, providing perspectives from entry-level staff of color who are not typically heard is significant to the field of education. Documenting their voices can shed light on alternative ways universities can do business in the advancement of DEI initiatives that are designed to include staff of color and focus on their retention.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Little is known about entry-level staff of color and their experiences in student affairs as most research focuses on faculty, mid to high-level administrators, or students. Student affairs staff are important in the context of higher education because the staff provide various types of services and resources to not only uplift students but also retain them until graduation. Often it is the staff of color who build relationships and become mentors to marginalized students of color. Additionally, when staff accumulate years of service, the staff become even more valuable as they become stewards of departments and hold institutional memory.

To understand how higher education has evolved to operate in a manner harmful to its vulnerable staff members, this literature review addresses three areas contributing to marginalized staff experiences in higher education. Chapter I stated that the iron triangle of higher education often negatively impacts marginalized entry-level staff. The iron triangle of higher education is composed of access and diversity, academic profile, and capital simultaneously. These three goals are important to universities; however, they often choose to focus on revenue and academic profile over diversity (Jaquette et al., 2016). In the following literature review, the first section addresses funding structures in student affairs and how budget cuts affect DEI programming and staffing levels. The second section explores DEI initiatives within universities, the nature of these DEI characteristics, and the extent to which they were intended to include staff of color. Finally, the third section discusses the underrepresentation of staff of color in student affairs, as well as marginalized staff experiences on campuses, and focuses on how valuing staff of color can be used as a retention tool. However, all these
perspectives come from a mid-level staff of color as research on entry-level staff of color is limited.

**Theoretical Framework: Interest Convergence and Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) has many components and can be used as a liberation lens for research as it challenges the ways race and racism impact people of color. A key component of CRT is interest convergence. Bell (1980) theorized the idea of interest convergence through the case of Brown v. Board of Education. Interest convergence consists of equity policies appearing to help people of color but ultimately hindering their social mobility. Bell stated:

> The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of hites. However, the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites (p. 523).

Bell suggested that many factors played into the outcome of Brown v. Board of Education. The outcome of this case concluded that “separate but equal is not equal” to offer Black people equality. However, when looking at this case through interest convergence, the outcome favored those in power more, which included world diplomacy in fighting off communism and industrializing the South. These factors were then connected with Blacks who fought in World War II as they questioned their reasons to fight for America while they were actively being discriminated against. Thus, the decision to desegregate schools aligned the interests of both Whites and Blacks. While desegregation purported to solve the one major problem of access, it also created myriad additional and unforeseen problems for Black people, such as Black teachers losing their positions and Black students being punished in the classroom by White educators or
Black students dropping out of schools altogether due to structural racism. Schools today are also still very segregated (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Interest convergence thus is interest divergence, DEI in name only, because those in power keep all the advantages (Willner, 2019).

Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) critique on education, extended CRT to examine school inequity. In their work, school inequity is linked to three central propositions, which are:

(1) Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
(2) U.S. society is based on property rights. (3) The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity (p. 48).

They also argued that class and gender alone cannot determine inequity, although they do intersect with racism. They also add to the idea of Cheryl Harris’ (1993) scholarship “whiteness as a form of property” in CRT to education. Ladson-Billings and Tate recognized democracy was built on capitalism to protect property rights over human rights. U.S. laws protected property, such as slaves at one point, and caused the removal of natives from their homeland. Thus, whiteness prevents the inclusion of people of color in many realms as it erases or excludes them. For example, property laws inhibit people’s access to other peoples’ property, like denying access to or marginalizing Blacks’ and people of color’s access to the best schools. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings and Tate highlighted how the best public schools are in affluent White communities as these schools collect higher property taxes, which only benefits the children in these neighborhoods and blocks poor communities, usually people of color, out of schools with the best resources. They also addressed the intellectual property and epistemologies taught in schools as a form of whiteness because these epistemologies did not include people of color’s narratives or their history. Ladson-Billings and Tate concluded that race and racism are
embedded in educational structures and those structures do not provide people of color the same opportunities as their White counterparts.

Racism on campus impacts people of color in various ways. A tenet of CRT proposed that racism is indefinitely endemic in American culture, and discreet and overt racialized microaggressions also perpetuate in universities (Desai & Abeita, 2017; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Furthermore, microaggressions affect the performance of students of color, both academically and socially (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Solórzano (1998) research suggested that another component of CRT challenges dominant ideologies of meritocracy and equal opportunity. Solórzano investigated a scholar’s program which was created to allow people of color access to the teaching field. Through surveys and interviews with 66 Chicano/a scholars, they found participant scholars felt out of place due to the lack of representation of diverse people, were challenged with lowered expectations in the classroom, were thought of as benefactors of affirmative action, and faced both racist and sexist microaggressions.

Theoretical Framework: Neoliberalism

In addition to interest convergence as a theoretical framework for this research to highlight entry-level staff of color’s marginalization, neoliberalism informs best practices in organizations. When looking at higher education with a neoliberalism framework, coupled with interest convergence, best practices do not account for race or racism, nor the effects people of color endure under these practices. According to Hood (1991) the principles of neoliberalism ideologies are:

(1) attempts to slow down or reverse government growth in terms of overt public
spending and staffing; (2) the shift toward privatization and quasi-privatization and away from core government institutions, with renewed emphasis on 'subsidiarity' in Service provision. (3) the development of automation, particularly in information technology, in the production and distribution of public services; and (4) the development of a more international agenda, increasingly focused on general issues of public management, poky design, decision styles and intergovernmental cooperation, on top of the older tradition of individual country specialisms in public administration (p. 3).

Furthermore, for these principles, Hood argued that neoliberalism ideology is about resource allocation and associates work performance, a form of meritocracy, with rewards. However, interest convergence predicts that race and racism will impact resource allocation to DEI initiatives and that the opportunity for people of color to earn rewards is unlikely.

In Mintz’s (2021) research, he applied neoliberalism to higher education. According to Mintz, higher education treats students as customers and individualizes them. He also stated that the core principles of neoliberalism include:

(1) the belief in the efficiency of the free market, (2) the need to deregulate the economy and privatize the public sector, (3) the commitment to tax reduction, (4) the abandonment of the welfare state, and (5) the replacement of the notion of the public good with personal responsibility for one’s own welfare (p. 81-82).

According to Mintz, these principles have also shaped higher education. Under neoliberal ideology, higher education becomes a private, nonpublic, good. Additionally, as students become customers of higher education, Mintz suggested that higher education poured immense resources into attracting the best students through marketing strategies and through upscale facilities and dormitories. Unfortunately, these practices increased the cost to attend and perhaps even work at
these institutions. Lastly, Mintz suggested that when institutions try to raise their rank, they decrease the likelihood of Black and people of color from enrolling in their institutions as the best students on paper come from affluent neighborhoods. Furthermore, as whiteness is a form of property, in Hyatt’s (2010) ethnographic fieldwork, she found institutions not only played a role in adopting neoliberalism to gentrify the surrounding neighborhoods, but also became real estate investors. She discovered universities using eminent domain strategies to secure more property to grow and relying on private businesses to build up surrounding neighborhoods. In doing so, this has destroyed and pushed out communities of color as costs associated with accessing these structures have increased.

**Summary**

Neoliberalism predicts institutions will become more efficient, reduce spending, and increase the costs associated with higher education while holding individuals accountable for their actions. For universities to survive in a market-driven world, they must expand, which included gentrification of these institutions and the surrounding neighborhoods, as well as institutions becoming property owners themselves. Interest convergence predicts institutions that adopt neoliberalism practices will do so through a colorblind lens and will not account for how budget cuts or consolidating resources come into play with race and racism in higher education. When higher education institutions adopt neoliberalism, they do so without understanding the possible effects it has on the entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work. By striving for efficiency at almost any cost, they are diverging from the actual purpose of DEI and failing to retain marginalized staff.

**Organizational Structures and Student Affairs**

The division of student affairs structures, which their structures stems from the structures
of the university, plays an important role in student success as it provides alternative resources students often do not find in the classroom. Student affairs departments can assist with academic preparation, identity development, mentorship opportunities, dining services, room and board, recreational activities, career development, and social justice education. However, the organizational structure of student affairs is complex and varies across institutions (Arminio et al., 2010; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Kuk & Banning, 2009) and relies on corporate ideologies (Magolda, 2017) and often suffers budget cuts (Romano et al., 2010). In looking at the budget structures of student affairs, it is critical to analyze the ways in which budgets and funding impact entry-level student affairs staff as this can be a contributor to the staff retention dilemma. The nature of student affairs is hierarchical (Arminio et al., 2010; Kuk & Banning, 2009; Magolda, 2017) and it lacks financial resources and suffers budget cuts (Kuk & Banning, 2009; Romano et al., 2010). Student affairs must rely on fundraising and donors to operate relatively at the same consistent level (Gansemer-Topf & Englin, 2015) and budget cuts or downsizing have been the trend since 2005 (Romano et al., 2010), which causes fear in marginalized staff (Magolda, 2007).

**The Top-Down Approach in Higher Education**

Business models in higher education mostly impact marginalized staff. This is especially true during a recession where budget cuts and downsizing are at their peak. To capture the experience of marginalized staff, Magolda’s (2017) research explored the impact of institutional change from a bottom-up lens. The purpose of Magolda’s study was to highlight the experiences of those most marginalized in a campus subculture, the campus custodians, and offer a new way to think about the consequences arising from the adoption of corporate ideologies.
Magolda asserted “a central tenet of corporate ideology is fear” (p. 99) and “the business of corporate managerialism centers on three principles: centralizing power, minimizing labor costs, and increasing accountability” (p. 141). Centralizing power gives shared power to those at the top, such as faculty and high-level administrators. Minimizing labor costs keeps “wages as low as possible and staff lean” (p. 143). Increasing accountability enables auditing tactics to “ensure productivity, efficiency, and cost savings” (p. 146). These three principles negatively impact marginalized staff on campus. Furthermore, Magolda’s research revealed “custodial administrators expect supervisors to follow their mandates. Supervisors demand that custodians follow orders, period. This trickle-down chain of command reveals much about custodians and how universities do business” (p. 99). Thus, the chain of command, the top-down approach, expected those at the bottom to follow orders while those most marginalized are being policed on efficiency in performing their daily work duties. This type of environment would cause any staff member, especially those most marginalized like custodians, to be fearful of the institution.

Financial Environments and Structures of Student Affairs

In higher education, the financial environment and rising costs associated with student affairs have shifted to students. Unfortunately, when student affairs are confronted with budget challenges, student fees increase (Gansemer-Topf & Englin, 2015). In Gansemer-Topf and Englin’s quantitative research on the financial environments of student affairs, they used data from the Intergrated Postsecondary Education Data System to examine various degree-granting institutions. They found that expenditure patterns remained relatively consistent over the past two years, but student affairs reallocated funding from auxiliary revenues for support. Auxiliary revenues are streams of income students pay for additional services on campus, like meal plans or health and wellness services. The researchers also uncovered that in times of budget cuts, fees
increased for tuition, room and board, and student applications. These findings indicated student affairs divisions are complex, but student affairs overall are trying to preserve currently existing services at the students’ expense.

As students are impacted by the rising costs of higher education, the staff are also affected by budget shortfalls and recessions. Student affairs have been downsizing for some time and in a time of financial need, student affairs embraced staff attrition (Romano et al., 2010). In Romano et al.’s research, they investigated the culture of downsizing and the effects of budget cuts on student affairs. In their qualitative study within 12 universities, data was collected in 2005 through phone interviews with Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) and then again after the 2009 recession. There was only a slight increase in funds at some institutions, but that most institutions were still experiencing budget cuts as they did in 2005. Staff were more inclined to do what they were told for survival. Strategies for budget cuts included reduced staff salaries, decreased raises, eliminated jobs, and merged student affairs units, which are all signs of neoliberalism. Professional development for staff was also the first thing to be taken away. Student affairs also hired students over new staff to cut costs, while at the same time, increasing student fees as an important strategy to sustain student affairs. Student affairs departments had to reevaluate their programs to redirect funds. Unfortunately, this suggested that student affairs relied on hiring students over professional student affairs staff when faced with financial challenges. This could have negative implications for both the university and student development as student affairs work is placed on the backs of college students.

Separate from Romano et al.’s research, Kuk and Banning (2009) and Arminio et al. (2010) provided insight into different dimensions of restructuring student affairs. Kuk and Banning investigated current student affairs organizational structures from the perspectives of
SSAO. They also focused on the hierarchies of student affairs while exploring organizational changes and current limitations and strengths in student affairs structures. In their qualitative study of 240 institutions in all regions of the country, all institution types operated in a top-down approach while the level of reporting to the president of the university varied between institutions. However, their research did not account for those who report to SSAOs, like directors of departments, or entry-level staff who work under directors. Student affairs departments were consolidated into clusters depending on the type of services they provided, which included separating revenue-producing units from those funded by student fees (tuition-based support). Additionally, roughly 76% of respondents reported a restructuring of student affairs, with the main changes being a shift in reporting lines or merging units, cutting positions to address financial concerns, and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of student affairs. Lack of financial resources and insufficient staff were two factors which hindered restructuring goals. These findings implied student affairs work is being condensed, with both the funds and staff and their responsibilities being shifted to supervisors or other departments. As funding was shown to create change within student affairs, the lack of funding could be a driving force causing organizational restructuring instability along with the lack of staff to help implement any of the new changes.

Universities look to adapt and change but the way they do this was not through inclusion. Arminio et al.’s (2010) study, which focused on a purposeful sampling from five universities on professional student affairs staff, found that decisions around student affairs budgets were not inclusive of the staff, as the decisions were made behind closed doors. This caused student affairs staff to feel like second-class citizens. Additionally, student affairs funding was left out of the wider campus strategic plans because student affairs relied on student support fees for
operations. This implied administration perceived student affairs’ source of income as the students themselves, explaining why student affairs were therefore left out of the larger funding initiatives. Lastly, Arminio et al. found presidents wanted multicultural affairs to build relationships with advocates and donors, which caused some implications for the staff who were largely not trained to fundraise. This emphasized a need for more staffing and funding resources for this type of work. Unfortunately, these findings indicated the structuring of student affairs revolves around finances and student fees alone are not enough to support the mission of student affairs. Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness from campus administrators on student affairs’ financial needs and the needs of staff in performing fundraising initiatives.

Summary

The state of student affairs and its finances impact both staff and students. From this literature review, higher education is hierarchically structured and has consistently relied on business models to sustain itself, with the budget dictating how student affairs departments operate. In times of budget crises, student fees increase, and positions are taken away from full-time staff, with more work placed on students to support the mission of student affairs. As decisions in student affairs are made behind closed doors, the staff at the bottom suffer. While staff lose benefits such as raises, they also lose colleagues as universities embrace staff attrition as a method of survival without refilling crucial student affairs positions. Thus, cuts in budgets create more work for the remaining staff and student affairs services, which can include both DEI initiatives and the staff who perform DEI, as the next two sections of the literature review will discuss.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are core principles guiding many universities’
actions, policies, and visions when seeking to build an inclusive campus climate and make all feel welcomed and heard. In a 2016 study, students across the U.S. who attended universities with a stronger commitment to DEI reported experiencing less discrimination and biases at their institutions (Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education, 2016). However, as there is limited to no research on DEI practices focusing on the uplifting of marginalized entry-level staff of color in higher education, this portion of the literature review focuses on the history of DEI and how universities perform DEI on campuses to examine whether marginalized staff are discussed at all within DEI agendas.

Throughout the civil rights movement, Black students demanded a safe space on campus. This resulted in institutions’ first steps toward putting DEI into practice, which included the establishment of Black resource centers and ethnic study programs on college campuses (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). However, as institutions of higher education adopt DEI language into their mission statements and enact strategies to be more inclusive to students of color, they first do so by attempting to diversify their student body. Yet, diversifying the campus by race is not by definition inclusion (Lehan et al., 2020; Tienda, 2013), and often when college campuses say that they are diverse, they diverge from the intent of DEI and make it superficial (Patton et al., 2019).

The History of Diversity Issues in Higher Education

Higher education has a long history of excluding marginalized groups (Harper et al., 2009). Since universities were not originally built to provide an equal experience to marginalized students, higher education has attempted to adapt to be more inclusive to support those most marginalized within the institution (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). Clauson and McKnight’s case study considered the civil rights unrest of the 1960s and other historical contexts which play into
campuses expanding to provide safer spaces to support Black students. From the establishment of safe spaces for marginalized populations, in the 1970s - 1980s, campuses shifted to multicultural affairs to respond to various on-campus identities like gender and sexual identity, nationality, and religious affiliation. In the 1990s - 2000s, multicultural education focused on providing underrepresented populations with social justice education, suggesting the mission of cultural centers has changed to offer more equitable solutions to enhance the experiences of students of color. In the early 2000s, campuses then began creating a new DEI position, the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), to address larger campus issues and to determine institutional DEI needs which multicultural or identity centers could not address on their own, like issues on race and racism in the classroom. In the early 2010s, multicultural and identity centers have then shifted DEI work to revolve around intersectionality. Intersectionality is a term created by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and explains that people of color have multiple intersecting identities, like age, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and economic status, which are then construed by systems of power causing further marginalization and oppression.

In addition to the above research, in a synthesis of 15 years of research on student experiences, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found nine themes related to campus racial climates. The one theme directly related to DEI suggested institutions advertise that they are diverse through various forms of promotional materials, but their diversity is limited to rhetoric rather than concrete actions. The study by Patton et al. (2019) also confirmed this. Harper and Hurtado also suggested diversity on campus is “all talk,” and that if diversity is rhetoric for students, the same can be said for marginalized staff. Today, as demonstrated through Clauson and McKnight’s case study, campuses have shifted the DEI focus to heritage identity, community and dialogue, and accessibility and wellness. Together, these three categories are being
prioritized by some universities to shape community spaces on campus, which are said to be key plans for authentic actions to DEI. Under heritage identity, it is important for the staff to look like students of color, as representation is a form of DEI. However, their research does not address how DEI has evolved for the inclusion of staff of color.

DEI is also not just for the division of student affairs. DEI can also happen in the classroom through intercultural dialogue between races (Tienda, 2013). In her study, Tienda reviewed the pedagogic benefits of diverse campuses and found integration in the classroom was key to universities being inclusive. To give some context, classroom DEI usually falls under the responsibility of the CDO, as student affairs departments like multicultural centers are separate from academics. In Tienda’s research, she highlighted a very meaningful scenario about a class that was taught by both a liberal and a conservative professor, one being a Black professor and the other a White professor, and how they provided two distinct sets of lenses for learning outcomes. The professors’ take on the subject offered students multiple benefits as it fostered discussion and different ideas. Thus, Tienda found dialogue is important to be more inclusive on campus, but in most instances academic departments do not focus on promoting diversity in the classroom, let alone for the staff who also work in academic departments.

**Whiteness in Higher Education**

In a meta-analysis of DEI, Patton et al. (2019) examined 2510 empirical articles specific to DEI and justice (DEIJ) initiatives on college campuses. Research analyzed in this meta-analysis tended to describe how White students benefit from interactions with students of color, which is a form of interest convergence as diversity is practiced when White people benefit. Only 4% of the articles used a critical lens and only 2% of the articles offered specific initiatives to enhance the campus climate through DEIJ. Student affairs staff play an important role in
identifying strategies for reducing racial prejudice among students and student affairs training plays an integral part in providing a welcoming environment. However, while Patton et al. suggested student affairs staff are tasked with the labor of identifying the needs of students, they did not find strong variables determining the best methods for staff to achieve this task. At the same time, budget cuts minimized both staffing and staff resources in performing DEI. Nevertheless, the authors did not address how research on DEI neglected the role of diversity initiatives for student affairs staff.

DEI and Racism: The Role of Leadership

College presidents play an important role in advancing DEI agendas. If presidents want systemic change within their institutions, then they must take the lead (Kezar et al., 2008). Through interviewing 27 college presidents with a DEI mindset from various types of higher education systems (public, private, 2-year, 4-year, Predominantly White Institutions, and Historically Black College and Universities), Kezar et al. found presidents have applied peer pressure on faculty and human resources to hire people of color and changed their perceptions on who is qualified to do the work to advance diversity agendas. Their research also supported the claims of previous literature; namely, allocating resources, having a strategic plan for diversity, integrated dialogue between all levels of the institution, new administrative positions, and DEI taskforces are all needed to advance diversity on campuses. Still, presidents need to be on board and support these efforts in the first place. Furthermore, as the research focuses on a human resource framework, presidents play an important role in working with the student affairs staff. Some president participants mentored staff, which not only provided meaningful experiences for staff, but also enhanced the campus as a better place for students. Based on these findings, the authors claimed effective DEI measures need to be threaded throughout the entire institution to
create an inclusive and equitable campus. Despite their findings on staff mentorship opportunities from presidents, staff of color remain excluded from the DEI process in higher education.

Although the goal of DEI work is to mitigate racism, shift perceptions, and enhance the experiences of marginalized communities, university presidents mostly downplay racism on campus (Cole & Harper, 2017). In reviewing 18 college presidents’ statements on racial incidents, Cole and Harper found these presidents rarely address the racism or the system allowing it to manifest, but are quick to blame the individual wrongdoer. Therefore, university presidents may hardly address explicit racism at all, which negatively impacts marginalized communities.

Summary

Higher education is evolving in a manner to be more inclusive to students of color. One way institutions are practicing DEI is by hiring staff of color so marginalized students can see their identity reflected on campus. In supporting students of color, hiring staff of color who hold similar identities is key for students’ retention and success. Yet, the research on DEI rarely discusses the role of staff, much less marginalized staff. Furthermore, if those in power like the presidents in Cole & Harper’s (2017) study do not address racism, this failure to act could be mirrored by the supervisors of marginalized staff. The next section will consider the experiences of staff of color who are advancing DEI agendas.

Marginalized Staff Experiences

As noted earlier, higher education adopts corporate ideologies to sustain itself and to be efficient, but as they do this, it negatively affects staff at the bottom of the hierarchy (Magolda, 2017). While higher education shifts towards corporatization, actions like this make minoritized
staff feel invisible (Steele, 2021), feel undervalued (Bazner, 2021; Magolda, 2017; Steele, 2021), and caused the staff to be fearful the university (Magolda, 2017). Furthermore, because of business-like practices, minoritized staff are also challenged with microaggressions (Steel, 2021; Townsend 2021), burnout (Jones & Kee, 2021), and charged a tax, i.e., cultural or Black tax that people of color perform without recognition (Townsend 2021), which includes the unpaid labor (Bazner, 2021; Bichsel et al., 2021; Jones & Kee, 2021; Magolda, 2017; Steele, 2021; Townsend, 2021). Due to the factors challenging staff, higher education is at risk of losing more than half of its staff (Bichsel et al., 2021). To retain marginalized staff, an appropriate leadership style can play an important and effective role in uplifting and retaining them (Rheanna, 2021; Steele, 2021); however, leadership style is not the only way to improve staff retention. To better retain staff of color, it is necessary to examine the challenges previously researched in order to consider all the ways in which minoritized staff are marginalized within higher education.

**Staff Retention Issues**

Marginalized staff can often unofficially be tasked with performing extra work. Unfortunately, the additional work for marginalized staff can come in the form of unpaid labor (Bichel et al., 2022, Bazner, 2021; Jones & Kee, 2021; Magolda, 2017, Townsend, 2021; Steele, 2018). Unpaid labor can lead to staff retention issues, and higher education has a substantial staff retention problem. To better understand the staff in higher education, Bichel et al. (2022) found higher education is at risk of losing half of its current employees within the year for multiple reasons affecting staff and they provided solutions on how to retain staff. Unfortunately, if higher education cannot retain staff, particularly staff of color, then this makes it that much harder for the institution to follow through on its core mission to support DEI initiatives for students of color.
Bichel et al. (2022) invited current employees from all levels of higher educational institutions, including 2-year, 4-year, master’s, and doctoral programs. Out of 3,815 participants, 77% identified as female and 80% as White. Over 50% were supervisors and 98% of the participants were full-time employees. The three main departments of the respondents include human resources (31.1%), student affairs (20.6%), and academic affairs (9.6%). The result of this study suggested higher education is at risk of losing half of the current employees within a year, and 68% of those planning to leave will look at a different college campus. The biggest dissatisfaction among staff in higher education came from the categories of fair pay, investment in career development, opportunities for advancement, recognition for contributions, parental leave policies, childcare discounts or subsidies, remote work policies, and a flexible schedule. Staff felt most of their work could be done remotely, especially in the category of human resources, which was 31% of the respondents. Remote work opportunities are distributed unfairly, as in the case of those who work in financial aid, where only two-thirds of those working in financial aid are mostly or completely working on-site. Staff also saw rewards distributed unfairly and as 80% of the respondents were White, more information is needed to see how the rewards, such as remote work, was distributed to people of color. Lastly, two-thirds of full-time staff employees work more hours than 40 hours per week, which suggested that higher education employees need to work additional hours to complete their job as they have absorbed the responsibilities of other employees who left during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Business of Fear

As noted earlier, corporatization or neoliberalism impacts marginalized staff. To continue the conversation on Magolda’s (2017) study, business practices marginalized staff due to a top-down approach while expecting those at the bottom to follow orders. This work environment
caused the staff to fear the institution and feel as if they do not belong. Magolda offered new insights into how business ideologies impact the campus and its vulnerable populations. While most research has focused on faculty, high-level administration, and students, Magolda’s study focused on the voices most marginalized by business practices: the campus custodians. The campus custodians contributed a lot to the campus environment, but hardly received any benefits back or had benefits taken away. Furthermore, the custodians said business-like practices tore down relationships as new supervisors sought to break up custodians’ relationships with faculty, staff, and students by moving them to work in different buildings. These relationships were important to the custodians, but supervisors wanted to limit the relationships custodians had built up for the purposes of productivity.

Magolda’s custodians were also too busy to take advantage of professional development or educational opportunities, as most work two jobs to support their families. Professional development opportunities were limited to specific job classifications as human resources denied requests from custodians to take professional development opportunities that benefit the employee more than the institution – for example, taking accounting courses would help custodians do better with their personal finances, but might not directly benefit the institution. Additionally, with the lack of professional development for custodians, they were rarely promoted, and again, this is due to the nature of business-like practices.

The custodians’ wisdom and experiential knowledge also went unnoticed under corporate politics. New supervisors also diminished custodians’ campus knowledge, only seeing them as staff who clean and nothing more. The supervisors rarely listened to the custodians’ suggestions in matters of campus safety and efficiency practices that could have saved the campus money. Magolda also argued that custodial work was a form of student affairs work, as custodians...
cleaned up after students, helped students navigate the institution, and taught students’ valuable lessons like keeping their living spaces clean or comforting students when a need presented itself. These are also examples of additional forms of unpaid labor staff may take on.

Magolda’s custodians are just one example of how hierarchies operate in higher education. Business models for success serve to perpetuate those hierarchies and continue to harm those at the bottom of the institution professionally, as well as instill them with fear. One alternative strategy that one of Magolda’s participants suggested was that higher education can switch back to family values, which prioritize building relationships, not breaking them down. Hierarchies and efficiency practices push back on the time it takes to build the relationships and community necessary for the personal and professional development of staff at the bottom.

**Supervision and Value**

Within institutions governed by corporate ideologies, leadership plays a key role in staff retention. As leadership styles impact marginalized staff (Rheanna, 2021; Steel 2021), supervisors must adapt to the needs of the staff they supervise. However, most of those in leadership positions are not equipped with the tools to build inclusive environments for staff of color. In the hierarchy of higher education, both the supervision and leadership style play an important role in sustaining and uplifting staff. Steele (2021) suggested staff of color often feel invisible and supervisors play an important role in making staff of color feel valued through equitable supervision. However, many staff of color continued to feel undervalued in spite of this (Bazner, 2021; Magolda, 2017; Steele, 2018).

The purpose of Steele’s study was to investigate the challenges faced by staff of color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) at a university in the midwestern U.S. There were 18 participants consisting of current and past staff members. The participants also self-identified as
belonging to a minoritized group. The staff of color reported experiencing microaggressions and often felt invisible, ignored, and underappreciated. They were also taxed with extra work, which included long hours extending beyond 40 hours per week without additional compensation. Working beyond 40 hours per week is part of the tax people of color must pay to achieve DEI, which often includes urgent and important conversations with students and time spent navigating or deflecting the harm caused by microaggressions. Some participants stressed that feeling valued by their supervisors made them feel good, which allowed them to be their authentic selves in the workplace. However, most of the participants did not have this type of relationship with their supervisors and thus, could not be themselves. For those who did not receive equitable supervision, they had to find, if they could, mutual support through communities on campus. Mutual support allowed marginalized staff to navigate the bureaucracies of the institution and tolerate their supervisors. While those who stayed in their positions for a few years were able to find mutual support, the new staff of color did not find it so easily, or at all.

Several conclusions can be made regarding how staff of color experience higher education at a PWI. Steele (2021) showed the staff experienced microaggressions and felt devalued. Additionally, minoritized staff were taxed with extra labor in performing diversity work, which highlighted how PWIs tokenize individuals when it comes to DEI work. The experiences of faculty of color being tokenized are well documented (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014) and Steele’s research adds to this by showing minoritized staff may also become tokenized in doing challenging DEI work. Moreover, the quality of supervision is key in making staff of color feel valued and visible. However, the lack of adequate supervision is a catalyst for minoritized staff to be unhappy in the many roles they play in universities.
Culture of Institutions and Effects on Staff of Color

Staff of color are challenged in navigating PWIs, and they often do not feel valued on campus. Bazner (2021) investigated how mid-level student affairs staff at PWIs experience the culture of the organization and how they critique the institution. In total, there were seven participants who self-identified as being minoritized, racially or ethnically. These participants were mid-level and supervised staff while also reporting to senior-level management, such as deans and Vice Presidents of Student Affairs. A narrative inquiry approach was used to highlight the feelings and the real-life experiences of the self-identified minoritized participants. The results indicated staff of color often feel their voices carry little to no weight and their concerns are dismissed as personal grievances when they challenge institutional practices. The local community, such as amenities and resources, also played a role in how mid-level staff of color were challenged in feeling safe and welcomed into the community where these PWIs are situated. Furthermore, for the staff of color to obtain resources, they felt they had to codeswitch into White spaces, which is a form of tax, as this allowed them not to risk the consequences for speaking back to power or being looked down on when wearing clothing that reflected their identity or heritage. Furthermore, the participants stated their PWI’s commitment to DEI was not practiced, as individual White leaders ignored crucial conversations related to pay inequities and the support for underrepresented staff development. Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. Organizational structures and resources shaped mid-level minoritized staff experience and how they navigated the institution. For staff of color to be rewarded with resources in PWIs, staff of color had to adapt to the dominant culture of whiteness. Whiteness is threaded into higher education and is a form of property often denying access to people of color (Brayboy 2005; Cabrera et al., 2017; Gusa, 2020; Patton, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Thus, to receive rewards in
higher education, Bazner suggested staff of color need to “fit in” to benefit from the structures of whiteness and neoliberalism.

Along with the challenges endured by all staff, diversity educators (who perform DEI work and often come from marginalized backgrounds) frequently perform duties outside their job descriptions. The extra work associated with diversity often leads to burnout (Jones & Kee, 2021). Jones and Kee (2021) sought to obtain more knowledge on diversity educators and to gain insight into the magnitude of the invisible labor involved in sustaining diversity initiatives on campus. They found the extra work associated with advancing diversity initiatives impacted the longevity of marginalized staff in higher education. The study took place across various higher education institutions in the U.S., which included participants mostly from 4-year institutions that were PWIs and three institutions from HBCUs and involved 20 participants in student affairs at multicultural or intercultural centers doing diversity work. The results suggested the participants' invisible labor supported their primary DEI responsibilities and led the participants to recognize the institution valued the outcomes of regular labor rather than the invisible work that went unnoticed. As universities are run like a business, leadership was interested in the end products of DEI and not the labor and sacrifices staff performed to do their work. Furthermore, mentoring students, training the campus community, cross-campus collaborations, serving on committees, improving campus climate, fundraising, being a community liaison, and advising students were not specified in the participants’ job descriptions, yet these staff members performed the work as there was a need. Participants also expressed a lack of funding and support, and struggled with work-life balance. The invisible labor also caused participants to work overtime with no additional pay. This form of invisible labor had an emotional cost on the participants and led some of them to burnout. On a positive note, some participants stressed the
importance of finding balance and the need to restore their energy so they could continue the labor required for DEI. However, no concrete actions were given on how to sustain staff of color who work to enhance DEI on campus.

**Summary**

Higher education is hierarchically structured and relies on business models which keep marginalized staff, those at the bottom, operating submissively and in fear. Supervisors also cause staff to feel undervalued and invisible. With the many challenges staff of color endure on campus, the body of literature indicated that more staff might be needed to counteract the invisible labor that staff perform. Institutions need to build relationships in their diversity initiatives and shed light on all the invisible work conducted by vulnerable staff in order to prevent burnout and improve staff retention. Furthermore, corporatization may impact the resources needed to sustain DEI entry-level staff. Higher education needs to look at the roles of those who are doing DEI work and make sure they are properly paid for the work they are performing so they are not taxed, while also providing funding to sustain the work. Funding can be used to advance programming or hire more staff, so diversity education can become a collectivist goal, building up relationships, rather than standing on the shoulders of just a few marginalized staff.

**Review of the Literature Summary**

This literature review has shown corporate ideologies, hierarchies, and lack of financial resources negatively impact both the staff of color and DEI in higher education. Higher education has evolved in a manner that exploits marginalized staff in student affairs. In doing so, institutions of higher education simultaneously hire and then push staff of color out of the university as they cannot retain them, or universities eliminate their positions altogether.
Universities cannot retain minoritized staff because they feel undervalued, unheard, invisible, and endure microaggressions. Marginalized staff also are not adequately paid and are taxed by the work that DEI in institutions calls on them to do, and this has caused staff of color to burnout. In times of budget crises, marginalized staff work more hours and at the same time lose benefits, while student fees increase, which inhibits future access to those most marginalized: students of color. Thus, as higher education adopts neoliberalism practices, it is diverging from the important objectives of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which harms both the students and the staff of color concurrently. Yet, no literature was located for review that focused on how DEI ever evolved to include staff of color, only students.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study centered on the experiences of the entry-level staff of color, those at the bottom of the institution, who perform DEI work on campus. As institutions of higher education are impacted by funding, this research also looks at how funding or lack thereof impacts both staff of color and the DEI initiatives they perform. The possible benefits to others from this research include the production of additional knowledge that highlights entry-level staff of color and their experiences performing DEI. As most research in higher education does not include entry-level staff of color experiences in their research, this study might be beneficial to advance future research on entry-level staff of color in higher education. This research may also pose useful to those who supervise entry-level staff of color in any capacity and can create the urgency to generate additional funds for DEI staff and initiatives.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design via narrative inquiry to describe how entry-level staff of color performing DEI work experience student affairs. In these narratives, the researcher sought to provide counternarratives by providing a platform and giving a voice to those not often able to speak back to those in power. According to Aronson et al., (2020) “When we engage with counternarratives […] it is fraught with tension between socialized experiences, and the content of our teaching that refutes normalcy and calls out the domination in master narratives” (p. 19). This form of storytelling is used as a method in CRT. Interviews were used to collect stories or data on staff experiences with the primary goal of revealing staff experiences and how university structures and budget cuts impact them. The narrative data were then transcribed, coded, and categorized into six themes related to the research questions. A brief
survey was also conducted to gather general participant information. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do marginalized entry-level staff of color performing DEI describe their student affairs experience?

2. How are these experiences shaped by university structures, which include: funding, budget cuts, supervision, gentrification, and staff attrition within their department?

3. Lastly, to what extent does a relationship exist between university structures and racism that impact marginalized entry-level staff of color?

Interest convergence (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Willner, 2019), and neoliberalism (Hood, 1991; Hyatt, 2010; Mintz, 2021) were embedded in the research questions. The research questions focused on the experiences of entry-level staff of color and looked at how the institutions, as they adopted neoliberalism practices through downsizing, shaped the staffs’ DEI experiences. Lastly, interest convergence suggested that for DEI initiatives in universities to advance, they must align with those in power who adopt neoliberalism, and research question three looks at the relationship between universities’ structures and racism that impact entry-level staff of color.

**Population and Sample**

Participants in this study worked at three different four-year flagship public universities in California which have a commitment to advancing DEI on campus and retaining and recruiting the best possible staff. All universities are also Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI). In total, there were 6 participants, and their interviews were conducted with Zoom Video Communications, Inc. and recorded. The sampling procedure used by the research was purposeful sampling (Emmel, 2013). The participants were restricted to entry-level staff
performing DEI work in student affairs. Participants included staff from cultural and or identity-specific resource centers or student affairs committed to uplifting students of color. Outreach for participants was through email invitations based on entry-level DEI positions in student affairs. All participants were given pseudonyms as indicated by Table 1 along with other pertinent participant demographics such as ethnicity and years of service.

**Table 1**

*Participant Pseudonyms, Pronouns, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Department, Service Years, and Education.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>He/Him/Él</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Trans Man</td>
<td>Identity Resource Center / Staff</td>
<td>7 months (3 years as student-staff)</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Cultural Resource Center / Staff</td>
<td>6 months (1 year as student-staff)</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Identity Resource Center / Student-Staff</td>
<td>6 months as Student-Staff</td>
<td>H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnnie</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Student Affairs / Staff</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>She/Ella</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Identity Resource Center / Staff</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaina</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Black, African</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Identity Resource Center / Staff</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrumentation**

The instrumentation utilized for data collection consisted of both a brief survey and an interview protocol. The brief survey gathered Table 1’s data and was used to ensure participants were entry-level staff of color who worked in a department affiliated with DEI. There were also a set of 12 questions asked in each interview lasting for a period of 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. Additionally, in the recruitment process, the researcher emailed several identity-specific departments and targeted entry-level positions at multiple universities. The email was also forwarded to directors of identity-specific departments and the research asked them to forward
the email to individuals they work with who do not supervise any staff members (supervising students was acceptable). Nine participants responded to the call for research participants and out of the nine, seven were interviewed. Of the seven that were interviewed, the research has chosen not to include data from one of the participants as they did not meet the criteria. Although this participant felt they were entry-level, they had two master’s degrees and held a salaried position. Additionally, the following questions were asked in my interview protocol:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your role and what brought you to this role in higher education?
2. How does your ethnic and or gender identity influence your work?
3. What DEI initiatives have you been working on?
4. In what ways does the campus racial climate influence or impact your work?
5. What do you find most rewarding in your position? What do you find most challenging in your position?
6. What pressures or systems (internally or externally), if any, do you feel create these challenges?
7. Can you also tell me a time when you witnessed a major organizational change in your department or student affairs? What has changed and how did this impact you or your department?
8. What, if any, are the resources given to you to be successful in your position? Have you ever had any resources taken away?
9. What do you believe the university can do better to cater to its DEI mission?
10. Have you ever been denied a raise or a promotion and what do you feel are the reasons for this?
11. Have you considered leaving your position or advancing within your institution? What factors have led you to think about this?

12. Is there anything about your experiences in performing DEI, that we haven’t discussed, that you feel is relevant to my research?

**Human Subject Approval**

The researcher was granted human subject approval through and by the University of San Francisco (USF) Institutional Review Board designated to the researcher under Dr. Seenae Chong, Protocol #1438. Additionally, the researcher obtained a certificate from the Collaborative Institutional Training Institute for the course on “Human Subjects Research”, and the certificate of completion for this course, record ID #53266887, is provided in Appendix A. Prior to the start of the interview, each participant signed a consent form outlining the benefits of the research, as well as the confirmation of confidentiality for all participants, and this is provided in Appendix B. All participants were given pseudonyms and the departments and the universities they work for are also unidentifiable.

**Data Collection**

The data gathered came from six participants interviews who self-identified as entry-level staff of color who work in various departments in student affairs, such as cultural or identity resource centers. In one way or another, all participants perform DEI functions to enhance the campus climate for marginalized students. One participant was a current student-staff member, and the other five participants were staff members who, after graduating with their B.A. degree, transitioned immediately into working in student affairs or identity centers performing DEI. The results from this narrative inquiry were recorded and transcribed through Zoom Video Communications, Inc. and the data were derived manually into themes which are presented in the
following chapter. Zoom Video Communications, Inc. allowed seamless access to video and audio recordings. Zoom Video Communications, Inc. also allowed transcriptions of the interview. All three (video recordings, audio recordings, and interview transcriptions) ensured counternarrative accuracy. As all research questions were related to the entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work and their experiences, for research question one, the researcher focused on how participants obtained their entry-level positions, as well as their experiences working in DEI. For research question two, the researcher focused on specific experiences caused by the structures of universities. Finally, for research question three, the researcher focused on how universities or their structures are inherently racist against DEI entry-level positions in general.

**Data Analysis**

The collected data were transcribed and categorized in terms of each research question. The researcher transcribed the text, line by line, and pulled out key themes and quotes shared between participants. The researcher would also listen to the audio to make sure any key elements describing staff experiences were not missing. For information that was missing, the researcher followed up with the participants through email. The emerging themes and quotations were then selected from the interviews. The themes identified by the participants were: (1) identities influence DEI positions, (2) joy experienced by performing DEI, (3) value found in supervisors with similar identities, (4) funding insecurities harm staff of color (5) budget cuts impact DEI initiatives, and (6) racism is often experienced in university structures.

**Researcher’s Background**

It is crucial that I, the researcher, expose my positionality and potential biases in the analysis of the data collected. My experiences are strongly influenced by both my undergraduate experiences and my experiences as an entry-level staff member who works in multicultural
affairs in higher education. In navigating higher education as an entry-level gay staff of color, I have come to realize DEI work is not easy. Nevertheless, it becomes critical to not only acknowledge the historical and current sacrifices to end the harm which stems from settler colonialism, but also it becomes crucial in disrupting all forms of oppression and intersecting “isms”, which are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, ableism, etc. that inflict pain by denying equitable resources to Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (QTBIPOC). It is vital to amplify the voices, blood, sweat, and tears of diverse communities that have been and continue to be exploited through various methods such as microaggressions, prejudices, and cheap labor. Furthermore, I feel there is a moral obligation to validate the lived experiences of marginalized people to pave the way for a just future for all. Often, marginalized communities do not realize the system is set up to favor those who come from privileged and more affluent backgrounds, and students and staff of color with intersecting identities who make the sacrifice and attempt to achieve social mobility, become victims of a system that does not love them, simply because identity is socially constructed and society considers anyone not White, heteronormative, and male as less valuable. Consequently, community-building identity spaces and programs remain the pillars of resisting institutionalized white supremacy. QTBIPOC spaces are essential not only in holistically uplifting marginalized campus communities through high-caliber anti-oppression programming, but those spaces also provide a safer and inclusive environment regularly not found elsewhere in institutions. Although these spaces are more likely to be underfunded as most DEI initiatives I have witnessed are, a repercussion of White supremacy, leaders on campuses need to make critical conscious decisions in approaching DEI efforts to dismantle its own white supremacy hidden in the structures so the most marginalized identities can thrive.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

As higher education is at risk of losing over 50% of its workforce due to issues like fair pay, lack of investment in career development, opportunities for advancement, and recognition for contributions (Bichsel et al., 2022), it becomes important to look at how universities and their structures operate, not from a hierarchical standpoint for DEI, but from a bottom-up approach, which are the experiences from entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work in universities. It is important to not only comprehend but also to appreciate their experiences because they are the ones hired by universities to perform the tough work that DEI calls for and they also work directly with vulnerable student populations to create inclusive campus environments. Additionally, it is vital to conduct this research because prior research neglects the experiences of entry-level staff of color.

Entry-Level Staff of Color Experience and DEI

The data collected in response to research question one (how do marginalized entry-level staff of color performing DEI describe their student affairs experience?) can be organized into the following experiential themes: (1) identities influence DEI positions, (2) joy experienced by performing DEI, and (3) value found in supervisors with similar identities. Theme one can be concluded from the participant’s responses on how their identity influenced the work they do in terms of both racial and gender identity and the reasons for their position in higher education. Theme two findings addressed the community and the relationships staff build among students of color. Theme three findings are in relationship to the formal and informal mentorship provided by their supervisors in the immediate DEI workspace.
Identities Influence DEI Positions

As DEI in higher education has evolved to include staff who resemble students of color, all participants described how their identity influences their DEI roles and how both their undergraduate experiences, which is a form of identity, and their personal identity led them to their current positions in higher education. Furthermore, half of the participants already worked at their center but as student employees. Two participants also had background experience and mentors in student affairs which allowed them to immediately transition to a full-time role after graduation, and the last participant was a current student-staff member. All participants said their identity influenced their positions. For example, Daniel talked about his intersectional identity and that the reason for him to be motivated to work in his department was due to his personal safety, and through his identity, he could create change for students. Daniel stated:

But what motivated me to get into the position was due to multiple factors. Of course, there's always the survival factor. I had no idea what I was going to do after the University and [the center] being known to me, being a space where I could be a queer and trans person, I didn't have to worry about how am I going to be interacting with folks in the day-to-day work [because] life outside of university knowing that sometimes corporate-like business and other non-higher education, non-student affairs positions can be a lot more difficult, to interact with, as a queer and trans and Latino person. [...] Also, [the reason for the position was to have] the ability to give back to my community. I want to leave a legacy of coming into a space and leaving it better [...] because I've experienced all the difficulties of being queer and trans [on campus]. I know what needs to be changed, or what I feel needs to be changed, and I kind of hope to move some of
that progress forward. I don't think it will happen within the next or however many years, but that is my motivation.

Daniel highlighted how his identity and difficult experiences in navigating his institution as a student was the primary reason for him to work in DEI. In addition to Daniel’s personal safety, Jessica also described how her identity shows up in the center and described how non-verbal communication, being visible, creates safety for others. She stated:

I am one of three women and one of three black women on the team. I'm one of the most visible [staff] in our center and I feel it plays a pretty major role, especially with the climate of our campus being heavily White. I am the first face that [students] see, which means a lot for students who are Black and fem, and who are missing that type of community from the rest of campus. So, it's a pretty big deal, especially […] when seeing other black students and getting that nonverbal communication of, I see you, you're the first I’ve seen on this campus since I got here, but you're here…. I feel my most salient identities are called into place when I am at work, even doing mundane office tasks.

All participants described how their identity influenced their work and that being a staff of color creates safety for students of color. All but two participants worked for identity-specific resource centers, which means their ethnic identity aligned with the student population the university seeks to serve. Additionally, three out of six participants specifically described how their personal safety was a key part of their motivation to work in their departments.

Joy Experienced by Performing DEI

All participants experienced the same reasons for joy in performing DEI work for their centers, which is building an inclusive and safe community for students. This theme is true for all
the participants as they found helping and building a community for students of color was rewarding to see. For example, Johnnie stated:

It's most rewarding when students just feel heard and [are] safe, and the fact that students feel comfortable, even coming to us and addressing us is the most rewarding. It's a tough position, but when we're able to make those spaces for students, and they feel they can actually work collaboratively, that is the best feeling.

Another form of joy five out of six participants expressed came from the collective community of other staff of color who worked in the immediate DEI spaces. Participants said they felt inspired and motivated to continue to do DEI work. This joy is informed by the community-building aspect DEI spaces seek to promote, a culture of caring among staff of color. For example, Elaina stated:

I have so much support here. It's difficult to even sum it up in words… I think the way we are able to support each other, and work collectively has inspired me to seek this out. […] I don't think I would have been able to feel as though I'm thriving, living in a [White affluent city] without that kind of support, and genuine care. I also know from colleagues that don't work inside the resource centers, that that's not necessarily the case across [this campus], and so I found a really amazing bubble and it actually has been something that I've had to weigh when I think about my next steps for my career, and whether I'm ready to move on from the [center]. I keep coming back to the fact that I don't know if I'm ready to move on from this community of people yet, and I think if I'm going to spend 40 hours a week somewhere, I wanted to be with people that I really care for and so they inspire me.
The immediate work environment for entry-level staff of color, which also includes other colleagues of color who perform DEI, played an important and rewarding role as this motivated them to push through in performing DEI.

**Value Found in Supervisors with Similar Identities**

The work culture can have a positive and negative effect on staff of color and supervisors play an important role in building up a positive work environment. Similar to the joys staff expressed in having a culture of care, all but one participant expressed they felt valued by their supervisors. In describing what tools they have to be successful, Jessica stated:

> I'm always encouraged to prioritize my self-care. We're always talking about how to manage all of our heavy workloads by putting ourselves first. I take breaks when I need to. I take a walk when I need to. I get food when I need to. I think that the biggest support that I've been given is the understanding that I am able to work on my own time and manage my load the way that I feel it needs to be managed. There's no one who is breathing over my neck.

Jessica demonstrated self-care and a work environment that is free from micromanagement may help entry-level staff feel valued and cared for. DEI work should include these components because work associated with DEI can cause staff to be overworked, which leads to stress and burnout. Jessica noted there are tools that can alleviate some of the burnout, and an effective leadership style supportive of self-care is crucial.

In cultural or identity resource centers, supervisors who hold similar identities to entry-level staff of color are also important as there is a relationship of cultural understanding. Elaina described how the identities of the current and former directors of her center make her feel valued as an employee, she stated:
[My center] was founded by a [Black] woman and after that, every director that has been in the [director] role, has been a woman, and that is meaningful to me. [...] I believe [they all] identified as a woman, and I feel powerful being able to do this work in a space where I feel so seen and heard. [These] are intangible things that I can't exactly describe to another person, but I feel I'm understood here. [Even the other interim directors I had were all women as well. [T]his work can be really nurturing. Every woman is not necessarily nurturing, but for the women I've worked with, it feels very natural, and the first-time interns that I worked with that had been supervised by [my director], so many of them, say that she single-handedly helped me learn how to take care of myself. [My director] does so much spiritual and emotional work, and that is the thing that fuels me in [my] work, which is the intimate human connections that you can make with all the people that come into the space and so my identity feels affirmed here. I feel safe here, incredibly safe and seen and valued. And those are things that I might not have come into as easily if I didn't see myself represented [in my directors].

Supervisors who are staff of color and have similar gender identities may play an important role in uplifting entry-level staff, as Elaina noted. For example, Johnnie is the only participant who worked not for an identity center specifically but for the division of student affairs in general. While they felt they had a good relationship with their supervisor, they noted their need for a mentor who reflected their identity and who was able to be transparent about the struggles of working in an institution. In reflecting on what was necessary to be more successful in their position, Johnnie stated:

Good mentorship, and also good management, but specifically from someone of color. Someone who has worked in the institution long enough to know the internal
complications of it, but has the intersectional lens. I prefer a mentor from someone who is QTBIPOC, who will be honest with me about the struggles of working in student affairs. I think there are a lot of people in student affairs that are very nice and not very honest and or transparent.

Thus, supervisors and colleagues who are people of color may play an important role in the positive experience of entry-level staff of color who perform DEI. For example, Andrea described how her supervisor, who was also Latina, not only offered Andrea her current position but also provided Andrea with advice to negotiate her salary. Andrea felt this type of informal professional development came out of their relationship as Latinas in this field. Andrea stated:

[W]orking together within another Latina women of color has been a big impacting factor when it comes to running the center and running the different events and programs […] [W]hen I was offered the position, my supervisor, out of the kindness of her heart, offered me the position, but she encouraged me to negotiate my salary. She didn't have to do that. I think it’s because of our strong mentorship and our strong connection. She wanted to support me in that way as a new professional and supervise me right. She wanted me to grow and develop that skill. She encouraged me to do that, otherwise, I might not have.

In addition to the skills that Andrea received in negotiating her salary, she also described performance evaluations as a genuine mentorship opportunity with her direct supervisor. This genuine mentorship opportunity might not have happened if her supervisor was not Latina. When asked what tools were given to Andrea to be successful, Andrea stated:

[E]valuations, timely evaluations at the end of each quarter, where it's a specific time for my supervisor and I to talk about what goals we had in the quarter. Did we meet them?
What goals do we have for the next quarter? What challenges? So, it's really a time for me to sort of express the things where I feel, oh, this is something I could improve on, or oh, this is something that I feel I already have mastered. Being able to have that time and space, together with my supervisor [who holds my identity], her [mentorship] has been really helpful.

Five out of six participants expressed positive outcomes when supervisors have similar identities to those they supervise. However, Johnnie stated they needed more QTBIPOC supervisors and mentors on their campus, which will have a positive experience for them and others.

**Structures of the University and its Effects on Staff of Color and DEI**

The data collected in response to the second research question (how are these experiences shaped by university structures, which include: funding, budget cuts, supervision, gentrification, and staff attrition within their department?) can be organized into the following themes: (1) funding insecurities harm DEI staff and (2) budget cuts impact DEI initiatives. These two themes can be concluded from the responses of how the participants and the departments they work in are challenged financially with budgets and staffing constraints.

**Funding Structures Harm DEI Staff**

All participants explained how student affairs funding structures impact them financially. Specifically, they mentioned their starting wage was too low to meet basic needs. Some participants also described how the pay increases they received were embarrassing and made no difference to their cost of living. Additionally, all participants described how, although having a background in student affairs or working as a student-staff who had developed the expertise of working in higher education and doing DEI work, they still received low wages. In describing his experience when being hired, Daniel said:
[T]his position almost didn't exist. When this position got funding to be a full-time role, they gave a low and a high pay range. I had three years of experience as a student-staff member. I had been in the interim program coordinator position for six months. I came in with all this experience and knowledge, and also with my intersectional identities of being queer, trans, Latino, first generation, alumni, all of these different things, and I was part of all these different clubs and departments, and advocacy and activism, I was told that I was going to be paid just 25-cents above the bottom. I advocated for myself through negotiation, which you know is typical of a hiring process, or should be, and I was only given a 25-cent increase.

The funding structure for DEI wages also affected how and where DEI entry-level staff of color live. All described housing issues and some could not afford to live near the university or the community they served due to high rent. Two participants also commuted roughly two hours or more each way and those who did live near campus described how they either had roommates or housemates to barely make ends meet.

In describing the struggle of living costs, low pay, and housing conditions, Elaina said:

The cost of living [here] continues to rise, my salary does not, and I think I knew this going into the job, even in my second interview, the director warned me. She said, [people] usually do not stick around living [here], it is really expensive, and this job does not pay that much money. […] I currently live with six other people, and that itself is something that I never thought I would do but it makes working and living here feasible.

While all participants described being challenged by a low salary and its effects, they also described how there is a need for more staff to make DEI work sustainable and to combat burnout. However, DEI funding and budget cuts hindered the hiring of more staff to assist them.
In addition, in the need for more DEI staff, five out of six participants described working off the clock, as a form of unpaid labor, and all participants described they were aware of or have witnessed staff retention issues in their field and three participants were affected by them. Two participants were also waiting for staff-only identity groups to come back but the lack of staff retention was making it harder for staff of color to build up these forms of community.

Furthermore, Elaina described how a week after she got hired, her director of the center quit. Since then, Elaina had gone through four directors and several interim directors. In fact, Elaina is one of the longest-serving DEI programmers on their campus. Furthermore, although Daniel has only been in his position for a few months, he has already witnessed staff retention issues in his department as a student. Daniel saw how staff retention issues negatively affected staff and student workloads simultaneously, he stated:

There's been a few major organizational changes within my own center during my time as a student staff member. We had a team of five staff, three full-time staff, and two graduate students. Essentially, during one year, two of our full-time staff and both of our graduate students had left the Center […] the two full-time staff went onto new positions. It went from a team of five to a team of one. The massive difficulty was there was one person, that career staff member, who had to run a full center, and still carry on as if the center was at full functionality. However, we have the students’ needs, we have assumed demands we have to fulfill, but then they are still struggling with no team to fulfill those roles. […] we don't have the staffing, we don't have people to go and advocate for the funding, we don't have the people to do the outreach anymore. Then the student staff felt that they had to take on more. But then that career staff member is also trying to take [work] off of the students’ plate, knowing that they're also doing all these things. I think
the issue now, seeing it from a career staff perspective, now that I am full-time [the question becomes] how do you still navigate the fact that we're never going to have enough staff within your team?

Budgets also affected DEI positions to the point where three out of six participants described their DEI positions are not safe in terms of job security. As Daniel previously described, his position barely got funding for its role, Jessica’s position was temporary. Unfortunately, this means Jessica will not have a job after she has worked a certain number of hours. In describing the lack of job security and resource taken away from her, Jessica stated:

Unfortunately, the way that things are right now, I have been in conversation with others about trying to make my position permanent, a concrete position within the center. This reminds me of the larger system that we're working underneath, but as of right now, I don't have any clarity about what my position will be after the end of the school year. I have a limited amount of hours to work. This is a resource that I feel, job security, has been taken away from me.

All participants described their challenges working as entry-level staff of color in DEI and how funding and budget cuts have played an important role in making the staff participants feel undervalued. They mentioned they are challenged by low wages, high housing costs, and the lack of additional staff to support DEI programs, which caused burnout in some participants. Furthermore, half expressed they were worried about their current positions and Jessica will not be returning to work next academic school year.

**Budget Cuts Impact DEI Initiatives**

In addition to funding structures and budgets impacting the staff, all participants described how their departments are challenged with budget cuts and the impact it also has on
DEI initiatives, which includes the hiring of student-staff. All participants said student-staff wages were very low. Johnnie described this as:

A lot of these student workers are students of color and they're being paid minimum wage in a lot of positions. I wish that students got paid more especially the ones working in these resource centers who are providing space and hosting events for students, but unfortunately, that's something that is out of my hands. It's out of my department's hands. It's something that's way beyond, in higher-up administration. But I definitely think that it's not equitable.

Some participants also described having to cut student positions to make new budgets work. In addition to the lack of budgets to pay students a decent wage, Marie described how her resource center’s emergency grant, which supports low-income students in a financial crisis, had also been affected by budget cuts. Marie said:

They cut [this] grant. Essentially, that grant helped students if they were eligible, to cover things like medical expenses, and transportation if students had to leave for a family emergency. That grant would also cover the [cost] of graduate school fees. Right now, there's a really long waitlist of students, including myself [for that grant]. …[A] counselor told me, if you think you're going to eventually need the [grant], you need to apply asap, as soon as the fall quarter. But obviously, in the fall quarter, students don't know that life can just unexpectedly turn. So, obviously, a lot of students didn't apply for it because they didn't think they would need it. By the time students needed the [grant], for whatever reason, it was already too late. And as of now, there's just a really long waitlist. And I believe that they're just not considering those students anymore because there's not enough money.
All participants described the lack of awareness among students about the available resources on campus. This may be related to a phenomenon described by three out of six participants about the lack of funding for outreach for both on and off-campus. In describing her resource center’s lack of funding for outreach, Andrea stated:

Our center is newer and so the different ways that we're funded are different from other centers that have been here longer. Our center does not do or is not funded to do outreach, outreach to high schools and colleges. However, we are contacted by a lot of different nonprofits or high schools. Mostly by high school counselors who want to bring their students to campus to have a tour and visit our center. And so, I think I'm realizing through this position that I really have a passion for outreach and I want to take on all of those requests. I want to say yes to all the high schools that want to visit us, whether it's presenting a short presentation to them on what we provide to students for when they potentially apply here. Because it's not technically under our center’s funding, we have pressures to not continue doing this type of effort, and that makes me really sad. I think that it's a disservice to not allow student groups to come and let them see that this [center exists for them] when they potentially apply here.

With the lack of funding for outreach and sustaining the emergency grants for students, all participants described their center’s program budget was going to be cut the following year by either getting rid of programs or their DEI budgets was going to be cut by a certain percentage. While Jessica’s department had a healthy budget through student-lock-in fees, she described how other campus departments are not well-funded. Yet, Jessica also said that her department is facing cuts and expressed that staff of color must justify DEI spending. Jessica said:
I've talked to a lot of people on campus in different departments that do similar, social justice programming as us, and they are not given the funding that they need in order to really create a robust set of programs. Although we have more funding, there's still an era of, oh, do you really need that to do the work that you're doing? Do you need really that much money to do what you're doing? And it always seems that we have to justify our spending. [...] Though we are well funded, our center offers a DEI course, and we are going to cut back on it due to budgets. That's just one of a few cuts I know.

Funding and budget cuts impact DEI initiatives. Not only are the full-time staff paid a low wage, but the student-staff of color are also paid a minimum wage. There is no funding for DEI awareness, such as outreach, and grants and programs are being cut. As Jessica described, there is some money, just not enough money to sustain DEI programs and initiatives. If there is money for DEI at a certain point in time, it is often cut later.

**Racism Often Experienced in University Structures**

The data collected in response to the third research question (to what extent does a relationship exist between university structures and racism that impact marginalized entry-level staff of color? can be organized into one broader theme: racism is often experienced in university structures. This is due to the oppressive treatment entry-level staff of color systematically endure while performing DEI.

The issues oppressing entry-level staff of color were not conflated with their immediate supervisors but were due to the hierarchies in university settings that are resistant to enacting DEI practices. As most DEI positions are held by marginalized identities, the data showed that the funding issues for DEI and the hierarchy in university structures oppressed entry-level staff of color, even when they hold a B.A. degree from the same institution or from an equivalent
institution. Four out of five participants were also told they needed a Masters’s degree to advance in their field, which they felt defeated in applying to new DEI positions that paid a higher wage. DEI positions are typically held by students and staff of color as noted by the participant pool and although some participants described their work as providing safety, in terms of them being able to fully be themselves in the workplace, all considered leaving the institution. This outcome was due to issues surrounding funding, low wages, housing issues, budget cuts, lack of advancement opportunities, burnout, not enough staff, and the pushback from higher administration on DEI advocacy. It was not any one factor but how these compounding issues affected the participants. For example, Daniel vividly describes how these issues work together.

Daniel said:

When I think of our entry-level staff, I think of what is the future [for them], what investment is actually happening? I think I would really center it on, not just equitable pay, but I would send it on. What is the emotional, mental, and social toll that's coming onto our entry-level staff? Funding is one thing, being paid a living wage so that you can just go about your day, right? But then you get into, if you're not having that funding, if you're living further away from the communities here […] and this takes a toll on your mental health because you don't have a community anymore. You wonder if you're going to have your next meal, and you wonder if you could meet your next milestone, whether it's buying a car, getting an apartment, or buying a house. It takes a toll on your social life because again, community, and also you're moving into communities you're not really used to, and [it affects] your physical life because now you're doing commutes that are upwards of two, three, or four hours per day. And if you're not getting access to remote work, it's nearly every day. What does that do to
your health? You can't have the energy to be with your families, with your friends. You don't have the energy to do exercise or move your body. You don't have time to even be outside. And then, you don't have time to cook for yourself or do whatever you do to take care of yourself. It's more than just what are the issues within the structure of the university. It’s also the way university structures impact the personal life of these entry-level staff.

University structures and hierarchies also affected transparency. All participants, in one form or another, described how hierarchies affect inclusion by excluding key staff from participating in important decision-making processes affecting the wider campus. For example, Jessica stated:

On a more personal note [my supervisor] has been both the face of the center doing most of the work, and they are not invited to all the tables and the rooms that would reflect the work that they do for the center. My supervisor has been doing all the work and everybody sees it. It's very visual that my supervisor does the work and is the face of the center, but is not granted access to the spaces he is needed in. […] Often, when I think about this, the larger system that we try to do our work underneath, we work in a university system, and that reminds me of the systems that are at play and the hierarchy that's going on, and all of that brings me back to reality.

Those in power in university structures love to broadcast DEI to promote their institution as diverse, but their actions fall short of DEI’s true intent. For example, all participants stated their campuses were considered HSIIs, which grants the university additional funding. Some argued this allowed the “university to look good on paper” and yet they also described their campus as still “very White” and has no funding for Latinx programs and initiatives. As Marie
described: “We barely meet the 25% threshold to be considered an HSI, but I don’t think that we’re doing enough initiatives to truly serve Hispanic students.” Furthermore, Marie, Elaina, Jessica, and Andrea described budgets that sustain resource centers catering to the Latinx community already have been cut and will continue to be cut the following year. This is true at all universities represented in the participant pool. Thus, findings hint that university structures are set up to use DEI or people of color as a tool to gather additional funds or to look good in recruiting more students of color, but at the same time university structures do not fund DEI centers employing staff of color and catering to students of color. Findings suggest this is a form of racism, which will be further explored in Chapter V.

**Summary**

The data gathered from this narrative study provided narratives of joy and offered counternarratives to university systems. Counternarratives in this research gave a voice to those at the bottom, the entry-level staff of color who perform DEI work. Findings suggested entry-level staff of color bring their whole identities into their position. They found joy in collective communities and joy in making students feel welcomed and heard. Findings also suggested staff of color need supervisors, mentors, and colleagues who are QTBIPOC to feel valued and motivated to sustain the tough work that DEI calls for. Yet, entry-level staff of color are challenged by the bureaucracies of higher education and structural racism, which include low wages, high cost of living, working off the clock, burnout, lack of advancement, staff retention, DEI budget cuts, among others.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter IV’s findings suggest the participants (entry-level staff of color who perform DEI in higher education) are at the crossroads of working in environments which embrace their marginalized identities yet are situated in institutions that have made all participants think about resigning. The participants described some of the joys of DEI work, as well as their challenges, which, as prior research on staff retention suggests, may lead to their departure (Bichsel et al., 2022).

Before the participants accepted their full-time DEI positions, they had one to three years of experience and institutional knowledge of working in student affairs. With one to three years of experience, the participants are not entry-level but should be considered new DEI professionals. Their credentials suggest anything but entry-level and all of their student and professional experiences in DEI were factors for them wanting to work in a place where they could feel some safety and give back to students of color. However, regardless of prior work experience, knowledge of DEI in student affairs, and obtaining a B.A. degree from the same institution, all participants described how they were not valued but marginalized by university structures.

Discussion

The theoretical framework guiding this study was interest convergence as part of CRT and neoliberalism. As noted in Chapter II, interest convergence and neoliberalism impact DEI as DEI only takes place when people of color’s interests converge with those in power, but those in power benefit from the outcomes of DEI more than those it seeks to help. Along with interest convergence, DEI has also become a neoliberal tool, in that campuses promote DEI to attract
students of color to their institution. Yet, a lack of funding and budget cuts, which are discreet tactics of neoliberalism and structural racism, significantly impact DEI in all forms. In this study, six overarching themes emerging from the participants are: (1) identities influenced DEI positions, (2) joy experienced by performing DEI, (3) value found in supervisors with similar identities, (4) funding insecurities harm DEI staff, (5) budget cuts impact DEI initiatives, and (6) racism is often experienced in university structures, which is due to the oppressive treatment.

All participants described how their identities appear in their campus DEI roles. Although all participants are staff of color, four out of six participants’ identities specifically belong to an identity center, and the mission of these identity centers is to serve the student population with similar backgrounds. This finding is parallel to Clauson and McKnight’s (2018) case study on how DEI in higher education has evolved to include staff of color to resemble students’ heritage and intersectional identities, which causes students to feel a sense of belonging to campus. Heritage identity, as well as gender identity as this research suggests, was a significant factor for participants experiencing joy in working in DEI. Participants expressed genuine happiness in protecting students from university structures, which included community-building events and creating safe spaces.

New DEI professionals may also find joy in their immediate work environment as they themselves have found a community which provides collective care with other staff of color who also perform DEI work. This builds on Steele’s (2021) research, in that it takes a collective to retain staff of color as this allows communities to strategize. Although community building on campus for new staff of color can be extremely difficult and can take several years to accomplish (Steele, 2021), my findings suggest the majority of new DEI professionals, four out of five full-
time participants, already had a community prior to working full-time. Luckily, the participants built their community when they were students, and this allowed their communities to transfer from them being a student to now being a staff. However, my findings also indicate staff relationships can be broken up by neoliberalism as all participants have thought about resigning. When staff quit, this breaks up collective communities within the department and within the university and causes additional stress among the remaining DEI staff.

Building on collective communities, mentors identifying as QTBIPOC and those who can provide a transparent and intersectional lens to student affairs work, appeared to be a key factor in new DEI professionals feeling some value. This finding is in contrast to Bazner’s (2021) and Steele’s (2021) research as they suggest the majority of staff of color feel undervalued by their supervisors. However, new DEI professionals work in immediate settings which value their identities. The participant Elaina describes value as, “a culture of genuine care”. Furthermore, Steele’s study goes on to suggest equitable supervision is needed to support staff of color, and this is true for new DEI professional participants. New DEI professionals are taught to prioritize their self-care, which allows them to feel safe in the work environment, and their identities also feel affirmed through their supervisor’s spiritual and emotional work. Yet, regardless of collective communities and QTBIPOC supervisors and mentors, new DEI professionals are challenged by the bureaucracies of higher education.

Universities embrace a culture of downsizing (Romano et al., 2010) and similarly, my findings suggest universities do not have the funding structures to support new DEI professionals and serve students of color. This includes Hispanic students, as all universities from the sample pool worked in HSIs. DEI positions are underfunded as all new DEI professionals said they need more pay and more resources to combat burnout in supporting marginalized students. If there are
not enough resources to support DEI staff, then students of color are not fully supported either. Unfortunately, DEI funding is affected by interest convergence and neoliberalism which do not benefit marginalized identities. Furthermore, my research suggests new DEI professionals are more than qualified for their position, and the university specifically asks them to associate their identity with performing DEI identity work, but regrettably, their identity holds no financial value to the university. This is a form of unpaid labor and implies racism.

Research suggests universities ignore pay inequity conversations (Bazner, 2021), and play a role in gentrification, which pushes students of color out of communities (Hyatt, 2010). These are also forms of neoliberalism. Building on those findings, my research suggests pay is the number one factor affecting new DEI professionals. As described by some participants, the university’s role in gentrification also breaks up relationships as it pushes staff of color out of communities. My findings imply that although new DEI professionals experience some joy in their roles, these joys are not enough to combat the emotional and physical tolls from the excess work hindering new DEI professionals from achieving social mobility as all participants exhibited signs of fatigue. If interest convergence and neoliberalism continue to take hold over universities, new DEI professionals will look for new career opportunities elsewhere.

As interest convergence and neoliberalism operate in the form of low wages, students of color also become victims of exploitation in performing DEI work that professionals are hired to do. Again, Johnnie expressed students who work in cultural resource centers are paid minimum wage, and Marie, the only student-employee in the sample pool, said “I am doing the same kind of work [as the full-time staff] and if I were to ask for a raise, they wouldn’t give it to me because I am a student”. Johnnie and Marie demonstrated what Magolda (2017) identifies in neoliberal higher education as “a central tenet of corporate ideology is fear” (p. 99) and keeping
“wages as low as possible and staff lean” (p. 143) ensures efficiency. Marie, as well as some of the other full-time DEI professionals, are afraid to advocate for themselves and ask for a raise. When the staff of color witness funding issues and budget cuts, they may fear asking for more resources to support them, like a raise or additional staff support. Keeping staff lean also breaks up staff of color communities. Moreover, there is fear of being rejected or embarrassed, as Daniel was embarrassed when he received a 25-cent pay increase when negotiating his starting wage. Low wages and evoking fear, when students and professionals of color are being prioritized in DEI positions, is a form of structural racism, which affects students and staff of color simultaneously.

Funding issues for DEI and hierarchies in university structures oppress new DEI professionals. Daniel described this as a multitude of ways the university structures impact the personal lives of new DEI professionals. Daniel states these factors begin with pay, but also include “the emotional, mental, and social toll” new DEI professionals endure. This finding builds on Townsend’s (2021) research suggesting the Black or cultural tax which Black women are challenged with is structural racism and is normalized routinely in higher education. Townsend describes this as Black women having to prove themselves constantly while being overworked. Black women could not show up to work as their authentic selves, endured microaggressions, and had to be careful in how they spoke. Black women also saw White men being promoted to higher positions while being underqualified. The compounding issues Townsend and the participant Daniel describe are similar. Participants also shared that in order for them to move up within the university, they were told they needed a master’s degree. Townsend’s article suggests White men have an easier time rising to the top without credentials. People of color do not, which suggests a form of systemic racism. Since most new
DEI professionals have a devalued B.A. degree, a low wage, and are being pushed out by moving further away from their communities to make ends meet due to gentrification, structural racism exists and limits DEI in all capacities and continues to exclude staff of color. A low wage also explicitly states universities do not value the identities of those who hold DEI positions. If the university cannot afford to pay a higher wage to new DEI professionals, then they do not have a sustainable educational model, but a business model. Universities are quick to charge students a hefty price for a B.A. degree, yet institutions’ actions say they do not value people of color who have made sacrifices, for their university’s B.A. degree. It is baffling how universities continue to wonder why they cannot retain staff.

**Recommendations**

This study highlights the various types of issues new DEI professionals engage with while working in higher education. Although new DEI professionals experience some joys, the following recommendations are suggestions to end the harm stemming from interest convergence and neoliberalism to advance DEI in universities and also in research.

- Universities need to implement, not just state, DEI’s values into their core mission. DEI needs to be a strategy in how universities operate from the top-down, not from the bottom-up, if they truly want to uplift people of color.

- Universities actively need to work against interest convergence and neoliberalism in DEI funding. Outcomes of DEI need to favor people of color over the institution, as anything otherwise suggests racism because true DEI is intended to combat people of color’s exclusion. DEI should not be threatened by a lack of funding or budget cuts. Instead, universities should actively seek to increase, at the bare minimum maintain, DEI funding at all costs.
Universities need to honor new DEI professionals as they are called to bring their whole identities into play at work. Often, recent graduates of color, who have multiple years of experience working in student affairs and have a B.A. degree, become new DEI professionals within the same institution. Universities need to award them with equitable pay, valuing their experiences and factoring in the actual cost to live near the institution. Anything otherwise suggests the university and its funding models are unsustainable for people of color and DEI.

To end the harm associated with DEI burnout, universities need to hire additional staff of color in understaffed centers. More staff also equals more staff communities, which are proven to make staff feel valued. In the hiring of more staff, job duties that already exist need to be spread out to take some work off existing staff. The goal here is to mitigate burnout, not increase it.

Universities must encourage, value, and promote QTBIPOC to leadership positions if they have the experience. Having QTBIPOC leaders are proven to be beneficial to support new DEI professionals in student affairs.

As higher education has a staff retention issue, along with a yearly cost-of-living pay adjustment, universities should implement longevity pay increases to retain staff of color who perform DEI. As research suggests that staff of color think about quitting six months into their position, DEI longevity pay increases should be implemented early, which may include a one, three, and five-year increase in DEI services. This is a small sacrifice in comparison to the additional costs associated with retraining new staff and the burnout that is caused by staff retention issues.
• Universities need to be transparent in how staff of color can equitably advocate for themselves and for student needs. Often, staff cannot find their voice to speak up and this is due to the hierarchies embedded under neoliberalism. Research also shows new DEI professionals’ supervisors, as their supervisors are mid-level and are not afforded the same supervision style as they can offer, may not be able to advocate for their employees. Thus, a clear path where staff of color can bring up concerns is needed. This is inclusion.

• As there is limited to no research on new DEI professionals of color, more research is needed on the experiences of students of color who have transitioned to working in DEI in higher education, among other fields like non-profits and corporations. Research also needs to look at the experience of new DEI professionals who have decided to leave the profession of DEI. Having these perspectives may offer invaluable information as most research neglects their experiences. This may also lead to best practices in the recruitment and retention of staff of color who are doing work when DEI and CRT are being attacked.

• As this research suggest that people of colors’ B.A. degrees are undervalued and participants noted that they needed a master’s degree for a better paying DEI position, more research is needed to explore this phenomenon. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter III, the researcher has chosen not to include the data of one participant who had two master’s degrees and had a salaried position. Yet, that person still felt as though they were entry-level. Thus, research needs to explore the value of staff of colors’ graduate degrees and to see how structures of universities impact them, racially and financially.
• More research is also needed from students of color who work in DEI. Research has shown student involvement (Astin, 1984), like obtaining student employment within universities, leads to their success. However, more research is needed in how success from involvement looks like when coupled with students of color advancing DEI within the structures of the university.

**Conclusion**

Interest convergence and neoliberalism are recipes for DEI disasters. As interest convergence and neoliberalism converge with DEI, DEI becomes underfunded, and staff of color suffer in multiple ways. Universities need to actively work against interest convergence and neoliberalism in academia. In doing so, universities would build on the joys staff of color already have in performing DEI. New DEI professionals of color bring their whole identities into their positions, and they feel some safety in being authentically themselves in the safe environments they maintain and protect so students of color can feel welcomed, heard, and valued. As students of color need staff of color, new DEI professionals also need mentors with similar identities to make them further valued and motivated in performing DEI. However, these forms of joy are not enough to combat the emotional, physical, and social calamities challenging new DEI professionals as all participants have thought about saying goodbye to their DEI positions. In centering on the voices of new DEI professionals, they say they are exhausted from working in a system which does not value them or their needs. They also express signs of fatigue and symptoms of burnout in providing more than they have to offer when universities only award them with the bare minimum. Unfortunately, new DEI professionals tell stories of how DEI is unsustainable and the lack of funding, improper resource allocation, budget cuts, low wages, and staff burnout are all compounding forms of
systemic racism in universities.
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APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that:

Jesse Avila

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Subjects Research (HSR)
(Curriculum Group)

Human Subjects Research (HSR)
(Course Learner / Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of San Francisco

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Staff of Color and Their Experiences Performing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Higher Education conducted by Jesse Avila, a Masters student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenaee Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research is to gather entry-level staff experiences in higher education who perform DEI work. I am looking to gather the entry-level staff experiences as they are missing in research as most research focuses on mid-level Professionals, Diversity Officers, faculty, and students of color.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, the following will happen: The interviewer will have a conversation with the participant on their experiences performing DEI. See below for duration and location of the study. There will also be 10-12 questions with possible follow-up questions for clarifying the participant’s response.

With your permission, we will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, we will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, we can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don’t wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will involve one interview session that lasts for one hour. The study will take place over Zoom Communication Inc.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of education and international/multicultural issues. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational
experts, educators, and scholars and could affect the educational practice. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff, or professor).

**BENEFITS:**
You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include additional knowledge produced that highlights entry-level staff of color and their experiences with DEI. As most research in higher education does not include entry-level staff of color in their research, this study might be beneficial to advance future research on entry-level staff of color in higher education.

**PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts, and all audio files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer or hard-drive that we will keep in a locked file cabinet until the research has been completed. Original audio files will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 3 years from the date of data collection.

**COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator, Jose Avila at 805.699.1991 or javila2@usfca.edu or the faculty supervisor, Seenae Chong at (408) 421-2083 or srichong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRB@USF@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

____________________________  ______________________________
PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE             DATE