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# Not at the expense of me: best practices for Black women diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice practitioners in higher education

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NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF ME: BEST PRACTICES FOR BLACK WOMEN DIVERSITY,

EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS IN HIGHER

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research paper investigated the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the year 2020 in sparking a phenomenon of hiring chief diversity officers (CDOs) in higher education. By exploring the interplay between the pandemic, racial justice movements, evolving higher education landscape, and institutional accountability, this study aimed to understand the motivations behind the increased hiring of CDOs during this transformative period. Additionally, this research examined the specific effects of this phenomenon on Black women diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice (DEI&J) professionals in higher education. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social justice professionals in navigating their roles amidst institutional efforts to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and justice.

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

It can be with me or without me, but it can never be at the expense of me.

— Sonya Renee Taylor

In the last decade, at least 40 institutions have established a senior position known as the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) to lead diversity efforts, foster inclusion, and ensure diversity is deeply woven into the fabric of their organizations (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Research indicates that these crucial roles are predominantly filled by women and individuals from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) backgrounds (Jaschik, 2008; D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Although specific data on women of color in CDO positions is scarce, studies have consistently shown that women of color in the academic sphere are particularly vulnerable to burnout, as they navigate the compounded challenges of race and gender (González & Harris, 2013; Hune, 1998; Sulé, 2011; Turner, 2002; Turner et al., 2011). However, there remains a gap in our understanding of the unique experiences of Black women serving as diversity officers and the methods they adopt to counteract experiences of marginalization. This research seeks to fill this void, focusing on the experiences of Black women diversity practitioners within the realm of higher education. In this document, "Black" is intentionally capitalized as a gesture of respect and acknowledgment of the historical context and contributions of Black individuals, contrasting with the lowercase usage of "white" (Lanham & Liu, 2019).

**Background/Historical Context**

While recent years have seen an intensified focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the academic discourse, the role of a diversity practitioner in higher education has roots stretching back to 1968. Academic literature has frequently outlined a consensus on what

constitutes the role of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), offering a foundational definition for these professionals. Central to this understanding was the CDO Study in Higher Education, which established key criteria for identifying CDOs, including: (a) identification with the role; (b) a direct reporting line to the institution's president or provost; (c) holding a senior administrative position, such as vice president, vice provost, or dean, with a title that explicitly references diversity (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). These benchmarks have informed scholarly articles on CDOs (Fleigler, 2006; Stuart, 2010; Turner et al., 2011), and were instrumental in shaping the sample for this study.

Furthermore, an analysis of global LinkedIn data reveals that the most prevalent titles within the diversity field extend beyond CDOs, including positions such as diversity manager, director of diversity, and diversity consultant. For this research, a diversity practitioner is defined as anyone in a role focused on fostering diversity, equity, social justice, and inclusion, from the recruitment of diverse staff to strategizing on diversity initiatives. This broader definition, termed diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEI&J) for this study, underscores the shift towards incorporating a social justice framework in traditional academic institutions, moving beyond the conventional DEI model towards a more inclusive and equitable approach (Winters, 2020).

The establishment of DEI&J roles emerged as a response to the evolving social dynamics and educational methodologies in the U.S., spurred by the enactment of affirmative action, the Civil Rights Act, and laws promoting equal employment opportunities. Historically, academic settings were marred by practices of racial segregation, discrimination, and exclusion. The introduction of these transformative laws necessitated the recruitment of DEI&J professionals and the development of diversity training programs aimed at facilitating the transition towards inclusive campuses. These programs were designed to foster new approaches to recruitment,

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academic advising, tutoring, and job placement support for students who had been traditionally marginalized.

However, over time, the momentum for such initiatives waned, leading to a resurgence of barriers that contribute to the homogeneity of higher education institutions, thus failing to reflect the nation's racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. This has posed significant challenges for DEI&J practitioners in effecting meaningful social transformation. McKinsey and Company (2020) report an annual expenditure of $8 billion on diversity training in the U.S., yet these efforts often manifest as isolated sessions that fall short of addressing systemic issues or altering deep-seated attitudes, allowing for the continuation of racism and exclusion across educational institutions. DiAngelo (2016) highlights that these interventions rarely result in the increased employment of people of color or their representation in leadership positions. Additionally, evidence indicates that such singular training sessions may inadvertently reinforce biases or provoke negative reactions, engendering feelings of skepticism and alienation among BIPOC employees who perceive these efforts as superficial and ineffective in tackling the root causes of institutional disparities.

The relationship between diversity and higher education has seen significant transformation, intertwined with both historical and modern challenges related to access, inclusivity, the spread of knowledge, and the progression of society. Originally, higher education institutions in the United States were established with the purpose of educating elite white males for leadership roles in religion and politics (Thelin, 2004). Today, however, the vision articulated in university mission statements has broadened to emphasize values of diversity, inclusivity, global responsibility, and social justice, with the goal of cultivating graduates equipped to engage as active participants in a global community (Bollinger, 2003). This evolution has been

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driven by the civil rights movements, the enactment of federal laws against discrimination, and a collective commitment to ensuring educational opportunities for BIPOC individuals, women, those with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQIA+ communities (Roper, 2004). Furthermore, a wealth of research highlights the extensive benefits that diversity brings to individuals, educational institutions, and society as a whole, demonstrating its critical role in fostering rich educational experiences and societal growth (Chang et al., 2019; Gurin et al., 2002; Roper, 2004; Shaw, 2009).

**Incentives for Change**

During the Summer of 2020, citizens could not track the spread of the coronavirus without acknowledging the way it claimed a disproportionate number of Black and Brown persons due to healthcare disparities (Winters, 2020). Additionally, opinions on racial justice and police brutality shifted dramatically following the death of George Floyd with 76% of Americans agreeing that racism and ethnic discrimination is a daily problem in the United States (Cohn & Quealy, 2020). Forwarding to the Fall of 2020, former President Trump issued an executive order restricting diversity training by government agencies and independent contractors. As the world slowed down, racial disparities, police brutality and economic inequality could be seen on the television screens that became our windows to the world. These windows also prompted reconsideration of the structures supporting the academic enterprise as educational institutions published statements of allyship and condemnation of racism to the public, while presently operating under flawed policies and procedures that resulted in their records on diversity often being vastly contradictory with their aspirations for equity and inclusivity. As conversations on critical race theory (CRT) came into the spotlight, social pushes for educational reform played a large role in institutions admitting they needed to reset the fabric of academia on their campuses

both in the classroom and in administrative offices. Worthington et al. (2020) stated that instead of higher education institutions acting to eradicate racism embedded in institutional policies, practices, and everyday operations, they commonly act on and reproduce social inequities, serving as a small-scale representation of the larger systemic racism reflected in the United States. As racial unrest, political turmoil, pandemic spread, and high levels of unemployment became spotlighted as issues facing the United States, the impact of these issues were paralleled on college and university campuses nationwide - this is where the skills of a DEI&J practitioner have been beneficial to higher education institutions.

**The Re-Emergence of the Chief Diversity Officer**

The development of roles aimed at enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the realm of higher education marks a significant evolution in how institutions address these critical areas. Originating in the 1970s, roles focused on minority affairs began to surface within academic settings, commonly housed within human resources or similar departments geared towards compliance. Initially, these positions concentrated on navigating legal and risk-related aspects such as workplace discrimination, affirmative action, and ensuring accessibility. Positioned at the departmental level or within student services, these roles were not typically part of the executive leadership or the president's cabinet. While they played a crucial role in advancing discussions about diversity on campus, there was often criticism that these positions served more as symbolic gestures rather than effective mechanisms for addressing the genuine concerns of minority and underrepresented groups, who argued that their needs were still being overlooked.

In the early 2000s, the perception and implementation of diversity within higher education began to evolve, significantly broadening the scope and responsibilities of diversity

practitioners. This evolution was spurred by several catalysts, including pivotal Supreme Court decisions, like the critique of the University of Michigan's affirmative action admissions policy for its formulaic approach, prompting a more nuanced understanding of diversity. Institutions began to view diversity not just as a compliance or enrollment criterion but as a core asset that enriches the educational environment for all members and drives excellence across the board. Factors such as demographic shifts within student, faculty, and staff populations, alongside external pressures from economic conditions, legislative bodies, and federal directives, have placed universities and colleges at the heart of advancing diversity initiatives (Barceló, 2007; Kezar, 2008). The urgency for prioritizing diversity became even more pronounced with the disparate impacts of COVID-19 and was further amplified by the global protests sparked by George Floyd's murder in May 2020. This period saw a remarkable surge in DEI&J role creation, with job postings in the field witnessing a 123% increase from May to September 2020, despite the economic downturn caused by the pandemic (Murray, 2021). The momentum continued with a notable 16.2% increase in Chief Diversity Officer positions, highlighting a growing network of over 574 CDOs among 16,000 diversity professionals on LinkedIn (Anders, 2021), underscoring the critical role of diversity practitioners in shaping accessible and inclusive educational landscapes.

Moreover, there's a compelling economic argument for enhancing DEI&J roles, as evidenced by the review of the McKinsey and Company findings, Madsen, S. R. (2020) notes that organizations in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to outperform their peers financially. This recognition has also permeated to the highest levels of leadership, with 96% of CEOs now viewing DEI&J as a strategic and personal priority. Such commitments are manifesting in substantial investments towards DEI&J initiatives,

encompassing talent recruitment, community outreach, leadership diversity, and the adoption of transparent metrics, all aimed at bolstering organizational performance and reputation.

The Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) role has emerged as crucial in defining the ethos, culture, and triumphs of academic institutions throughout the United States, frequently regarded as a senior executive position. Although the exact duties can differ from one institution to another, successful CDOs are distinguished by their skill in weaving diversity throughout every facet of campus life. This encompasses enhancing the diversity of students, faculty, and staff, leading initiatives for cultural transformation to create inclusive spaces, embedding diverse subjects and viewpoints within the curriculum, and involving the wider community in discussions on diversity matters.

**The Chief Diversity Officer Phenomenon**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the year 2020 were transformative periods that intersected to create a unique context for higher education institutions. The pandemic exposed existing disparities and inequities, particularly affecting marginalized communities, while the year 2020 witnessed a global racial justice movement demanding systemic change. This study explored the interconnectedness of these factors and their role in sparking a phenomenon of hiring CDOs in higher education. Additionally, it investigates the specific impact of this phenomenon on Black women diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals, considering their unique experiences and contributions within the higher education landscape.

*The Intersection of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Racial Justice Movements*

The intertwined dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movements in 2020 played a pivotal role in the accelerated recruitment of CDOs within the realm of higher education. The pandemic shed light on prevailing disparities, with marginalized groups,

particularly Black communities, facing disproportionate challenges. In parallel, the surge in racial justice advocacy underscored the demand for systemic reform and heightened social equity, compelling institutions to confront and rectify deep-seated inequities and cultivate more welcoming spaces. This confluence of factors spurred a renewed institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, culminating in the deliberate appointment of CDOs to spearhead these critical efforts.

### *The Evolving Higher Education Landscape and Institutional Priorities*

The evolving higher education landscape, shaped by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, played a significant role in shaping institutional priorities. Institutions recognized the importance of resilience and institutional excellence in navigating the changes and uncertainties. To attract and retain diverse student populations, enhance their institutional reputation, and respond to the evolving needs of higher education, institutions turned to the hiring of CDOs as a strategic priority. These professionals brought the necessary expertise and leadership to develop and implement comprehensive diversity initiatives. Black women DEI professionals, in particular, played a crucial role in shaping these institutional priorities, bringing their unique perspectives and experiences to foster inclusive campus cultures.

### *Institutional Accountability and the Role of CDOs*

Institutions faced increasing external pressures to address diversity and inclusion from various stakeholders, including alumni, donors, and accreditation agencies. The racial justice movements of 2020 further intensified these expectations, demanding transparency and accountability in institutional efforts. To demonstrate their commitment and progress, institutions turned to the visible and tangible step of hiring CDOs. These professionals became pivotal in advancing diversity and inclusion goals, responsible for developing and implementing strategies,

policies, and practices that addressed the specific needs and experiences of marginalized

communities. Black women DEI professionals, in their roles as CDOs or in related positions,

played a crucial role in shaping institutional strategies and advocating for inclusive practices that

addressed the unique needs of marginalized individuals, including Black students, faculty, and

staff.

*Impact on Black Women DEI Professionals in Higher Education*

The rise in appointments of CDOs encapsulates both prospects and hurdles for Black

women in DEI roles. On the positive side, their intersectional identities equip them with

distinctive insights, enabling them to infuse their expertise into the development of inclusive

policies and practices. Their deep comprehension of marginalized communities' needs, especially

those of Black individuals, ensures that institutional efforts are precisely aligned with addressing

these unique challenges. Nonetheless, they encounter obstacles like tokenism, intersectional

biases, and an unequal burden of emotional labor. Acknowledging and alleviating these issues is

essential for fostering a supportive framework that empowers Black women DEI practitioners,

enhancing their effectiveness and the impact of their work.

The confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice initiatives, shifts in the

academic landscape, the push for greater institutional accountability, and the increasing role of

CDOs together shape the trend towards the augmented recruitment of CDOs within academia.

This trend bears particular significance for Black women DEI professionals, underscoring their

pivotal role and unique contributions in maneuvering through their responsibilities and catering

to the needs of marginalized groups within the academic sphere. By comprehending and tackling

these interwoven elements, educational institutions can establish more inclusive climates that

enable Black women in DEI positions to achieve substantial and impactful advancements in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education settings.

**Statement of the Problem**

The scholarly landscape on diversity in higher education features a limited exploration of the unique experiences of Black women DEI&J practitioners. Existing studies focus on Black women in diversity positions, delving into their interpretations of their roles (Del Priore, 2022; McCray, 2011; Tevis et al., 2022; Townsend, 2021; Walkington, 2017) and their involvement in multicultural affairs and residence life at predominantly white institutions (Ahmed, 2012; T. B. Johnson, 2021). These roles are intended to support organizational objectives for diversity or align with the business rationale for increasing the representation of women and BIPOC individuals (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

Historically, Black women have been tasked with shouldering the burdens of racism and inequality, often being placed at the forefront of addressing these issues. While it is posited that Black women serving as DEI&J professionals in predominantly white institutions are in positions where success is attainable, T. B. Johnson (2021) indicates that some find themselves confronting the very issues they were employed to mitigate, such as frequent microaggressions or misogynoir, leading to a phenomenon known as Black Fatigue – the compounded effects of systemic racism on Black individuals' physical and mental health (Winters, 2020). The demand for DEI&J practitioners surged in 2020, placing an immense reliance on Black academic staff and DEI&J professionals to lead discussions and provide support amidst a wave of public accounts of racial experiences within academic settings.

Many Black women, according to T. B. Johnson (2021), encountered a spectrum of racial and gender-based discrimination within their institutions, both before and after the upheaval of

2020, negatively impacting their engagement and satisfaction in these roles. In the past two years, Black women DEI&J practitioners have reported feeling an intensified burden related to their professional standing, from representing their race in the workplace to the necessity of code-switching and affirming their values to avoid being labeled merely as diversity hires (McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2003; Moses, 1989). This constant juggling act of meeting both professional and societal expectations leaves many feeling depleted, facing a stark choice: remain and face discrimination or exit the institution or academic sphere entirely.

Analyzing the roles of diversity practitioners within higher education institutions is essential for the effectiveness of diversity initiatives and for ensuring the recruitment and retention of competent professionals in these roles. Research conducted by D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) on 110 Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) revealed that a significant majority, 87% identified as people of color, 58% were female, and 98% served in predominantly white institutions. The establishment of CDO positions is a relatively recent development, with most such offices being created within the last decade and 72% of CDOs having held their position for less than five years. The tenure of CDOs often appears to be short-lived, as a survey by Jaschik (2011) of 94 CDOs showed that nearly half intended to leave their posts within three years. Among those planning an exit, around one-third were eyeing another leadership role within the DEI sphere, whereas 28% were considering career paths beyond diversity work. The survey did not delve into the specific reasons for these anticipated departures, which could range from aspirations for career growth and better compensation to desires for a more supportive work environment, strategies to prevent burnout, or efforts to advocate for underrepresented voices, including their own, within their organizations. Without detailed exploration, the motivations for leaving remain speculative. In response to these challenges, it's crucial to foster an environment

that empowers this often-marginalized group to openly discuss their experiences of oppression and challenge unjust social norms, thereby defining the support necessary for their professional and personal fulfillment (Freire, 2018).

**Purpose Statement**

This research aimed to examine the impact of the experiences of Black women in higher education over the last five years on their motivation and capacity to excel in their roles. By contributing to the limited body of research in this field, this study seeks to illuminate the unique challenges encountered by Black women, who navigate the dual dimensions of racial and gender minority status (D. L. Cook, 2012; M. C. Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Nixon, 2013). It aims to identify key factors and effective practices that contribute to their personal and professional achievements, and to provide insights for academic institutions on how to create a culture and implement practices that positively affect Black women DEI practitioners.

Moreover, this investigation delves into the emotional and intellectual demands placed on these professionals amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, societal racial tensions, and the divisive political climate of 2020. It proposes methods by which higher education institutions can proactively foster work environments that not only attract but also retain Black women DEI practitioners. This involves establishing spaces that are equitable, inclusive, and focused on justice—environments where they can sustainably thrive and continue their contributions to the field.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions (RQs) were addressed in this study:

- RQ1. What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education?

- RQ2. What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges?

- RQ3. How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success?

- RQ4. What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field?

## Theoretical Frameworks

In this qualitative study, the author employed multiple theoretical lenses to guide the research, analysis, and composition of the literature review, seeking to encapsulate the multifaceted experiences of Black women in DEI roles within academia. Initially, the study adopted the appreciative inquiry framework (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), which prioritizes the exploration and appreciation of the positive attributes of a given phenomenon—here, the professional lives of Black women DEI practitioners. This approach facilitates a comprehensive and uplifting portrayal of their experiences by highlighting their resilience, accomplishments, and positive impact.

Furthermore, the research integrated critical constructivism theories, including Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), critical race feminism (Wing, 1997), and social capital theory (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999), to dissect the complex realities faced by these practitioners. CRT sheds light on how systemic racism influences their professional lives in academic settings. Intersectionality provides a framework to understand the compounded challenges arising from their multifaceted identities. Critical race feminism examines the specific intersections of race and gender, offering insights into the unique experiences of Black women in DEI positions.

Social capital theory explores the significance of networks and community in overcoming professional hurdles. Additionally, the inclusion of community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2006) celebrates the rich cultural assets and varied forms of capital—such as aspirational, linguistic, familial, and navigational—that Black women bring to their roles, underscoring their resourcefulness and perseverance. Utilizing these frameworks, the study aimed to offer a rich, layered understanding of the lived experiences of Black women DEI practitioners, highlighting the dynamics of power, the value of their contributions, the richness of their intersecting identities, and the strength of their professional and personal networks. This theoretical grounding informed every stage of the research, from design and data collection to analysis and findings, enriching the discourse on this critical subject and enhancing our comprehension of the contributions and challenges of Black women in DEI positions within higher education.

**Significance of the Study**

Leaders in higher education must critically evaluate the impact of institutional racism on Black women DEI&J practitioners, particularly how it influences their effectiveness and sense of belonging in purportedly inclusive spaces. It's imperative for these institutions to foster trust with Black women DEI&J practitioners by acknowledging their contributions to the academic community and ensuring robust protections are in place to support their emotional, physical, and mental well-being in environments that have historically been exclusive.

Despite their expertise and leadership within the DEI&J domain, Black women practitioners often find themselves marginalized due to insufficient institutional support and understanding. This lack of preparation for their integration into academic roles exacerbates "cultural taxation" (Padilla, 1994, p. 26), a concept highlighting the disproportionate expectations placed on faculty of color to undertake diversity-related tasks in addition to their

standard duties. Such expectations can lead to burnout, particularly when institutions fail to initiate systemic changes conducive to their success. The trend becomes stark in light of 2020 hiring data, showing that despite an increase in DEI&J roles, leadership positions remain predominantly occupied by white men, which contributes to the cultural taxation of faculty of color (Segura, 2003). Emphasizing the inclusion of Black women in DEI&J roles is crucial for addressing racial disparities and ensuring that efforts go beyond surface-level inclusivity.

Creating spaces within academic institutions where Black women can serve as role models is vital for providing students of color with relatable figures, fostering a supportive environment for discussing racial issues. Without addressing the phenomenon of Black Fatigue, the potential mass departure of Black women DEI&J practitioners threatens to deprive educational communities of valuable perspectives and hinder progress toward a more inclusive future. Black women have long been pioneers of change, yet their contributions are often sidelined.

Incorporating the experiences of Black women practitioners with existing literature can guide institutions in introspecting their organizational cultures and practices that affect these key contributors. This examination is essential for advocating culture shifts, policy reforms, and the development of support mechanisms for Black women in DEI&J roles, as well as those aspiring to enter this field. Recommendations from this study aim to outline actionable strategies for organizations to cultivate a more equitable and supportive workplace for Black women in DEI&J positions, thereby advancing the mission of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in higher education.

**Assumptions of the Study**

As it pertains to this study, assumptions of the research that must be acknowledged stem from personal biases and preconceived ideas about the study brought forth by the researcher. Personal biases that drove this research stem from racialized experiences working as a Black woman DEI&J professional, experiences of others who have worked as subordinates to white men in DEI&J positions, and the knowledge of historical context that surrounds institutional racism in academia. Additionally, an assumption can be made that participants will be open to divulging all information needed for this study, however there may be some who fear loss of job or opportunity if they are vulnerable with interview answers.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are inherent limitations of this study, with factors surrounding the limited volume of literature in the subject area and a dearth of quantitative data specifically on Black women DEI&J practitioners in academia. The researcher anticipated challenges in obtaining data on the timeline for participants beginning or leaving their roles as DEI&J practitioners due to burnout. Participant bias is also recognized, as those who chose to participate may represent a subset with distinct experiences. The qualitative nature of the research raises concerns about generalizability, and the exclusive focus on Black women DEI&J practitioners in higher education may not fully capture the experiences of individuals from other demographic groups or professional contexts. The reliance on self-reported data introduces subjectivity, and the interpretation of themes is susceptible to researcher bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of experiences, and a longitudinal approach would be essential to explore the evolution of these experiences over time.

**Definition of Terms**

      *Black Fatigue.* Black Fatigue refers to the ongoing and cumulative effects of enduring centuries of racism, leading to profound exhaustion that manifests in physical, mental, and spiritual distress. This fatigue is passed down from one generation to the next, forming a cycle rooted in unaddressed systemic racism. It begins with pervasive and unmitigated racism within societal structures, leading to intergenerational stress and trauma. These experiences contribute to inherited racial disparities in health. Consequently, subsequent generations continue to face oppressive and inequitable life circumstances, which further perpetuate this cycle of fatigue and unequal outcomes (Winters, 2020).

      *Burnout.* The feeling of being physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted and devoid of motivation (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

      *Decolonization.* Decolonization, in regard to this study, recognizes the genesis term in its historical and literal meaning, however when viewing this term through a social justice lens, it can be understood as undoing structures upheld by white supremacy that disadvantage and marginalize BIPOC communities (Winters, 2020).

      *Diversity.* Diversity is the practice of including individuals from a multiplicity of social, ethnic, economic, sexual, gendered and ability-based backgrounds into an environment they may have been historically excluded from through policy or practice,  to eliminate all forms of discrimination and recognize the importance of a range of experiences being used in decision making processes to mirror the diverse society we live in (Avery & Thomas, 2004).

      *Equity.* Equity refers to ensuring fair treatment, access, and success in education for ethnic-minority and low-income groups traditionally denied these opportunities. It involves

rectifying historical imbalances to enable equitable educational experiences (Bensimon &

Polkinghorne, 2003).

*Inclusion.* Inclusion means creating environments where all individuals, especially those

historically marginalized by policy and practice, have equal access to resources and

opportunities. It emphasizes valuing each person's contributions and talents within an

organization or system (Dougherty & Kienzle, 2006; Özturgut, 2017).

*Institutional Racism.* Institutional racism encompasses the systemic policies, laws, and

practices that perpetuate differential access to societal goods, services, and opportunities based

on racial or ethnic origin. It manifests through disparities evident across various systems,

including housing, education, banking, public health, and the criminal justice system,

underscoring the structural nature of racial inequalities (Morgan et al., 2018).

*Intersectionality.* Intersectionality serves as a lens to understand how various social

categories—race, gender, class, sexuality—interact and contribute to unique experiences of

discrimination or privilege. This approach underscores the complexity of multiple marginalized

identities, advocating for a holistic analysis of power dynamics and social inequalities (Bauer et

al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1989).

*Predominantly White Institution (PWI).* A PWI is defined as an educational setting,

typically a college or university, where white individuals make up the majority of students,

faculty, and staff. This designation reflects the historical and ongoing systemic biases that favor

white demographics, often at the expense of racial and ethnic diversity and inclusivity. The term

highlights the challenges and impacts of racial underrepresentation within these institutions

(Sinanan, 2016).

*Racism.* This term describes behaviors, language, policies, or practices that either favor or discriminate against individuals based on their association with a specific racial or ethnic group, often one that is in the minority or marginalized. Such actions contribute to maintaining a cycle of inequality and perpetuating societal divisions (Anthias, 1999).

*Social Justice.* This concept emphasizes the just and equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, and rights across society. It champions the idea that everyone, irrespective of their background, identity, or life situation, deserves equal chances to contribute to and prosper in society. Social justice involves tackling systemic barriers and disparities rooted in race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and disability. It advocates for a culture of inclusiveness, diversity, and respect for human rights, striving towards a vision of society where every individual's worth and liberties are acknowledged and protected (Walster & Walster, 1975).

## Chapter Summary

The insights gathered from diversity practitioners, alongside the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movements in 2020, highlight the critical necessity to examine the experiences of diversity professionals in leadership positions within higher education more closely. With the growing importance of diversity roles in academic environments, it becomes essential to evaluate if these leaders are adequately equipped with the resources required to navigate their complex duties successfully. This chapter intends to review existing scholarly work to investigate how diversity is implemented in higher education, the re-emergence of diversity professional roles in academic contexts, and the particular obstacles encountered by Black women serving in these diversity positions.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

— Toni Morrison

**Introduction**

In the last half-decade, the importance of DEI&J professionals, especially Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), has gained increasing scholarly interest, as noted by researchers such as R. A. Leon (2010), Nixon (2013), Pittard (2010), D. A. Williams (2007, 2013), and D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2013). D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) have observed a significant growth in the field of diversity professionals, driven by the increasing diversity within higher education campuses and persistent social and economic inequalities. Despite the shifting landscape, resistance to inclusivity and equity initiatives remains a challenge, as highlighted by Kegan and Lahey (2009), positioning CDOs at the forefront of critique and debate on campuses, with D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2008) characterizing CDOs as key figures who often attract significant scrutiny.

Additionally, women of color in the academic sphere navigate compounded challenges at the intersection of race and gender, facing systematic marginalization (González & Harris, 2013; Sulé, 2011; Turner, 2002; Turner et al., 2011). This literature review explores the emergence and

evolution of diversity practitioner roles within higher education, focusing on DEI&J initiatives and the lived experiences of these professionals. It pays particular attention to the obstacles and effective strategies employed by Black women DEI&J practitioners, especially in light of recent developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the surge in racial justice activism in 2020. The review also considers how success in the realm of diversity leadership is measured, underlining the importance of creating supportive and inclusive academic environments that promote the well-being and professional advancement of Black women in these pivotal roles.

The educational landscape in the United States was originally designed to cater to affluent white males (Wilder, 2013). Despite significant changes in demographics, leading to campuses that are more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status than at any prior time (Espinosa et al., 2019), the foundational elements of whiteness and male privilege persist within the fabric of academic institutions (Cabrera et al., 2017). Over time, efforts to broaden the inclusivity of the U.S. higher education system have predominantly been driven by those from marginalized communities and their allies (J. A. Anderson, 2002). For example, it wasn't until the mid-19th century that women, through organizing protests and engaging in policy advocacy, began to gain access to higher education, though this access was primarily extended to white women (Renn, 2014). Despite these advances, numerous minority groups remained outside the purview of these educational institutions, prompting leaders from these communities to establish their own spaces for education and support. This led to the creation of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) by American Indian leaders "as a means to safeguard and promote tribal cultures, knowledge, and traditions" (Crazy Bull et al., 2020, p. 24), and the foundation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) by various religious

factions and abolitionists to serve the educational needs of Black students (J. A. Anderson, 2002).

The 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) was a pivotal moment that expanded educational opportunities for students from historically marginalized racial groups, notably Black and Native American communities. This legislation echoed the principles of affirmative action established during the civil rights era, setting a precedent that encouraged advocates for individuals with disabilities to champion the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act mandated that institutions receiving federal funds make higher education accessible to those with disabilities. The subsequent decade saw a remarkable increase in the enrollment of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, LGBTQIA+, and disabled students, as well as white women, across the United States' colleges and universities. Despite this progress, these diverse groups quickly realized that mere access was not enough. They advocated for the inclusion of more diverse faculty members and the integration of curricula that acknowledged the contributions of women, disabled individuals, and members of the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, challenging the dominance of Eurocentric narratives (Cabrera, 2019; Hernández, 2019). The insistence on representation and the rejection of a singular historical perspective often met with resistance from institutional leaders. To create a sense of belonging in environments predominantly occupied by white men, these students and faculty members campaigned for dedicated spaces on campus where their identities and experiences could be acknowledged and celebrated (Hill et al., 2020; Patton, 2010).

In their advocacy for designated spaces within academic institutions, various groups have underscored the importance of such environments to foster inclusivity (Hill et al., 2020; Patton, 2010). The groundwork for what is today recognized as diversity initiatives was laid by pivotal

legislation, including Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. These laws were instrumental in enhancing the presence of traditionally marginalized communities within higher education, marking the beginning of concerted diversity efforts (Stewart, 2017), and signaling a shift towards a more inclusive institutional culture. Nonetheless, Anand and Winters (2008) critique the majority of inclusion measures as being insufficient in duration and depth, failing to address the profound cultural and structural reforms necessary for achieving equity and eliminating systemic barriers that disadvantage minority populations. For instance, diversity training programs are often criticized for their superficial treatment of racism and other forms of discrimination, relying on oversimplified stereotypes that not only leave marginalized participants feeling alienated (Anand & Winters, 2008; Chang et al., 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) but also provoke defensiveness among white participants (DiAngelo, 2016; Patton & Jordan, 2017). Recognizing individuals' complex identities, which span across race, ethnicity, and extend into other dimensions such as ability, socioeconomic background, gender identity, age, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, military status, and beyond, is crucial (Collins, 2000, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991, 2013; W. A. Smith et al., 2009; D. A.Williams, 2013). This understanding has prompted the emergence of diversity practitioners dedicated to advancing equity and inclusion initiatives that are deeply sought after.

**The Evolution of DEI&J Practitioners**

Historically, research on diversity practitioners in higher education mainly centered around minority student affairs, affirmative action officers, or those assigned to increase faculty diversity (David, 1998; Moyer, 1992). However, the study of these roles and those who hold them have increased as the number of executive-level CDO positions have grown (Fleigler, 2006; Nixon, 2013; Stuart, 2010).

Positions for Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) have been a staple in sectors such as private industry, government agencies, and educational systems for years (Pittard, 2010), primarily focusing on legal compliance and the principles of affirmative action. The trend of appointing CDOs within higher education has been notably influenced by the private sector, as academic institutions draw inspiration from businesses that have made strategic hires to thrive in a global market. Factors such as demographic changes, global conflicts, uneven distribution of educational and socio-political resources, the rise of a knowledge-driven economy, and the role of diversity in admissions and financial aid strategies (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007) have all played a role in the increased presence of CDO roles in academia. This shift towards adopting such leadership roles is largely a response to the inadequacies of existing policies and practices in addressing equity issues (Fleigler, 2006). The drive to establish CDO positions in higher education is also motivated by both the need to proactively foster diversity and as a response to ongoing challenges. According to Banerji (2005), the demand for CDOs in educational settings has escalated as diversity is increasingly recognized as a hallmark of quality education. However, many institutions find themselves at a crossroads, uncertain of how to effectively nurture an inclusive environment in the aftermath of affirmative action, all while navigating the competitive landscape of higher education as a business. D. Leon (2005) shares that institutions do not reap the benefits of diversity, inclusion and equity on their campuses, despite the progress that has been made both in policy and practice of expanding educational access for historically excluded populations. This shortcoming has caused presidents to seek out CDOs as a means of leveraging diversity as a learning model to make their institutions more progressive (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). However, this proactive desire to move an institution closer to a more inclusive and equitable environment may not always be a priority for

leaders and may be prompted in a reactionary type of "damage control" to combat controversy and appease offended groups. For example, in 2022, COE College introduced a new dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion, President David Hayes, following a controversy concerning the board of trustees that resulted in the resignation of a Black member (Miller, 2022).

Previously mentioned roles such as the vice president for minority affairs were often viewed skeptically, seen as mere gestures towards appeasing protesting minority groups and their allies who were pushing for a cultural transformation within campuses, along with the integration of new policies and practices to support minority student admissions. Despite their inclusion in diversity strategies, these positions "frequently faced opposition from senior management and others, who unjustly labeled them as segregating diversity efforts" (Wahl et al., 2016, p. 489) by overburdening a single individual with the responsibility and likening them to a campus enforcer dictating behaviors. Moreover, there was a common perception that these roles were merely rebranded versions of student development specialists or affirmative action officers. However, a key evolution in the recent wave of CDO roles compared to their earlier counterparts is their comprehensive approach towards embedding diversity into the educational framework at all levels, focusing on policy development and infrastructural changes that place diversity at the heart of academic and administrative operations (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006, 2007). The concept of diversity has evolved beyond its original scope, which primarily recognized variations in race, gender, and other social identity characteristics, to a crucial element that enriches student learning and is essential for the pursuit of institutional excellence. In this context, entities like the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) have emerged as leading voices for diversity officers in the academic sphere since their inception in 2006 (NADOHE, 2022). With a membership that includes 421 institutions

encompassing a broad spectrum of educational establishments—ranging from public to private, from two-year colleges to four-year universities, along with state systems and various national associations (NADOHE, 2022)—NADOHE has significantly contributed to reshaping perceptions of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) and enhancing the understanding of their roles and contributions within higher education.

LinkedIn data reveal a notable surge in the global count of individuals occupying diversity leadership roles, showing an impressive 107% increase over the past five years (B. Anderson, 2020). This growth trend extends across various titles within the field, with those holding the title of Director of Diversity increasing by 75% and Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) positions by 68%. The CDO role, in particular, has emerged as the standard for senior diversity leadership within higher education, with prestigious institutions like the University of Michigan, the University of Missouri, and the University of Connecticut leading the way in shaping these pivotal positions (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). This upward trajectory in the creation of chief diversity offices underscores the scholarly consensus that such roles are instrumental in advising leaders of higher education on embracing and executing diversity initiatives more effectively (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). The continual increase in job listings for CDOs post-COVID-19 reflects a diversifying landscape of institutions eager to integrate such roles, showcasing a variety of institution types, control mechanisms, sizes, and locations. The DEI field offers a unique platform for academic institutions to engage proactively and thoughtfully in these endeavors, necessitating leaders who possess a nuanced leadership approach to clearly communicate their role's mission and engage the support of their academic community to drive meaningful change. An analysis by Antonio and Clarke (2010) of the mission statements from colleges and universities with CDO roles reveals a strong institutional

commitment to racial access, inclusivity, and diversity. Contrary to views that CDO roles might merely serve as symbolic gestures to avoid deeper conversations on racial equity, these mission statements reflect a genuine aspiration to acknowledge and empower historically marginalized groups and expand the scope of diversity initiatives (Antonio & Clarke, 2010).

Research has highlighted the advantages of diversity in higher education (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 1999; W. A. Smith et al., 2009), sharing that students who interact with diverse peers have an increased ability to see things from someone else's perspective (Hurtado et al., 1999) and develop leadership skills for a diverse democracy (Gurin et al., 2002). D. A. Williams (2013) shares that CDOs play a critical role in leading diverse efforts at colleges and universities across the nation and in order to successfully implement diversity, the idea of it must be linked to the academic mission of each institution.

## DEI&J in Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions aspiring to embed equity and inclusion into the culture of their campuses and integrate diversity-related responsibilities into the structure of the organization have created positions for diversity practitioners, and the call for these professionals continues to increase annually (Banerji, 2005; Fleigler, 2006). Despite this role gaining relevance in higher education as relatively new senior leadership positions, the emergence of these offices in higher education is not without historical precedence. In the 1970s, campus demographics began to shift, particularly when the first large group of African Americans enrolled at what were nearly all-white colleges and universities. This prompted higher education institutions to create diversity positions, such as the "vice president for minority affairs," to produce access- and retention-focused services to historically excluded students (Lowery, 2011; Pittard, 2010; D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Additionally, smaller committees and task forces, such as

disability services offices, ethnic studies departments, gender and sexuality centers, international student services offices, multicultural affairs offices, and women's centers, were established to focus on inclusion and belonging efforts for these groups (Lowery, 2011). Committees and task forces similar to those mentioned above continue to exist on campuses, operating through the capacity of an affirmative action or multicultural model (D. A. Williams & Clowney, 2007). Similarly, diversity positions focused on minority affairs continue to exist, and many campuses have evolved into the role of CDO whose focus is to continue the evolution of: (a) diversity, inclusion, and social justice initiatives and services for institutions; (b) developing compliance, recruitment, and retention efforts that address curriculum, campus climate; and (c) policymaking (Stuart, 2010).

**Symbolic, Political and Functional Roles of CDOs**

While the organizational structure for Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) varies among different institutions, there exists a broad consensus on their core duties (Barceló, 2007; Stuart, 2010; D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). The role of the CDO was initially established to promote, consolidate, and centralize the diversity efforts within an institution (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Given the multifaceted nature of this mission, CDOs now often act in a role that supports and facilitates diversity initiatives rather than bearing sole accountability for advancing the diversity goals of an institution (Pittard, 2010). The specific responsibilities assigned to CDOs, as well as the framework built to support them, are shaped by the unique characteristics of the institution, its diversity history and objectives, and the personal attributes of the CDO themselves (R. A. Leon, 2010). This role is dynamic, with CDOs frequently undergoing a structured evolution in their duties, necessitating swift adaptations to changes in their role's scope (Green, 2008).

As a result, many CDOs who carve out dedicated space for their work, are under-resourced, navigate this role with obscure expectations (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007), and using the power within their institutional charge is many times viewed as overstepping boundaries traditional of organization hierarchy (Pittard, 2010). Fear of the potential transformation of the academic landscape can introduce uncertainty among people with whom CDOs must work to advance diversity issues. This is a unique challenge many CDOs face, unlike other executive-level roles such as Chief Information Officers (CIO), who upon hiring have a clear understanding of their sphere of influence and technology infrastructure, and the institution acknowledges the need to invest time and money into their department to achieve successful outcomes. In addition, the role of CDOs, as individuals, may be best defined as a functional and symbolic representation of the diversity concerns they are hired to address, contrary to other senior-level executives in higher education.

CDOs must address decentralized structures for diversity work and institutional resistance to a shift in traditional ways of operating; additional barriers to change may include the institution historically being exclusionary, strained community relations. and navigating diverse cultures and micro-cultures that already exist on the campus (R. A. Leon, 2010). By and large, CDOs are not presented with formal authority to reward or punish those within their institution on the basis of individual or committee diversity progress. Consequently, the power granted to this executive-level position is typically grounded in status, persuasion, and symbols (D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006). Bolman and Deal's (2008) political and symbolic frames share a variety of strategies CDOs can implement to center institutional attention on diversity issues, which includes: crafting a plan and planning structure, implement performance assessments, balance relationships, mediate conflicts, negotiate alliances and compromises with

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allies and enemies. Although CDOs serve as facilitators, catalysts, educators, and persuaders in their organizations (Green, 2008), in many instances, CDOs are categorized as symbolic representations of institutional leadership being committed to diversity and serve to appease sectors of the campus that hold grievances with campus climate (R. A. Leon, 2010; D. G. Smith, 2020). The gravity with which CDOs are seen as symbolic figures may limit their ability to develop relationships and initiatives on campus because they are viewed solely as a social or political pawn of executive level leadership.

D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) described three different models of CDOs, depending on institutional resources and structure: (a) the collaborative officer model that has limited authority and support to coordinate initiatives autonomously, (b) the unit-based model which is provided more financial resources and staff support through a centralized department, and (c) a portfolio divisional model which comprises of a multiplicity of campus departments leading individual initiatives and reporting to the CDO directly – this is the rarest form on college campuses.

The significant impact of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) lies in their capacity to weave diversity considerations into the fabric of an institution's most pressing academic challenges. Unlike other roles where diversity might be a secondary or tertiary concern, for CDOs, it is a primary focus. Their initiatives are distinct from the conventional duties associated with affirmative action roles, though they often oversee departments handling sexual harassment and discrimination complaints. CDOs might take the lead in forming international partnerships with other educational institutions, devising new strategies to embed diversity into the academic and co-curricular programs, or working alongside academic boards to set institution-wide diversity mandates. This delineation into three main archetypes sheds light on the potential organizational

structures for CDO roles, which can range from individual offices to complex, multi-departmental arrangements. Parker (2019) identifies key administrative competencies essential for the effectiveness of a CDO in the higher education sector, highlighting the diverse nature of their responsibilities. The essential qualities and competencies of a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) in the higher education sector are critically outlined below, emphasizing the blend of expertise, insight, and interpersonal skills required to excel in this pivotal role:

- Technical Mastery of Diversity Issues: A CDO must possess a comprehensive understanding of diversity-related challenges within the higher education landscape, including knowledge of affirmative action's policy and legal aspects. They should be adept at using arguments related to social justice, educational benefits, and the business case to articulate the value of diversity.

- Political Savvy: Navigating the complex political environment of academic institutions is crucial for a CDO. They need to be adept at managing politically sensitive situations and adeptly navigating institutional politics.

- Ability to Cultivate a Common Vision: It's vital for a CDO to foster a shared vision for diversity, encouraging collaboration across campus sectors to embrace and advance diversity initiatives.

- In-Depth Perspective on Organizational Change: A deep understanding of organizational change mechanisms is required, alongside a proven track record of involvement in or leadership of change initiatives within educational institutions.

- Sophisticated Relational Abilities: Emotional intelligence, effective communication skills, and the ability to connect with others are indispensable traits for a CDO, facilitating the building of strong relationships across the institution.

- Understanding the Culture of Higher Education: An intimate familiarity with the academic culture is essential for a CDO, enabling them to work effectively within the unique dynamics of higher education institutions.

- Results Orientation: While not solely accountable for outcomes, a CDO must be committed to driving the diversity agenda forward to achieve tangible improvements and foster meaningful change within the institution.

These competencies underscore the multifaceted role of a CDO, highlighting the combination of strategic insight, interpersonal skills, and a deep commitment to advancing diversity and inclusion within the higher education context.

**BIPOC Women in Higher Education DEI&J**

Despite the significant increase in higher education enrollments among BIPOC individuals, particularly women of color, disparities persist in their representation in executive leadership roles within U.S. higher education institutions (Ryu & American Council on Higher Education, 2010). The 2007 report by the American Council on Education on Minorities in Higher Education highlighted that women of color not only surpassed men of color in earning undergraduate degrees but also secured a significant majority of associate (65%) and bachelor's degrees (61%). Furthermore, in the realm of higher education administration, women of color have outpaced men of color. From 1997 to 2007, there was an increase in minority administrators from 14% to 18%, with women of color representing 11% of administrators, compared to 7% for minority men (Ryu & American Council on Higher Education, 2010). Despite these academic and professional advancements, women of color in executive roles frequently encounter racism and sexism within their institutions. These challenges are

compounded by the broader inequities present within the educational trajectory (Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Ryu & American Council on Higher Education, 2010).

Research on Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) who are women of color remains limited. The foundational work by D. A. Williams (2013) and the collaborative efforts of D. A.Williams and Wade-Golden (2007, 2008, 2013) have significantly contributed to our understanding of CDO roles. However, it was through Nixon's (2013) dissertation, which focused on interviews with five women of color holding CDO positions, that specific insights into the experiences, identities, and the unique ways these women navigate their roles and exert influence were highlighted. This work illuminated the distinct challenges and agency practices of women of color CDOs. According to D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden (2007), the demographic composition of CDOs showed a predominance of African American/Black individuals at 74%, followed by Latino(a)/Hispanic at 10%, Asian American/Pacific Islander at 3%, and white individuals at 13%, with no representation from Native Americans. Notably, 58% of these roles were occupied by women, indicating progress in gender representation within academic leadership, yet underscoring the continued underrepresentation of women of color.

Curtis-Boles et al. (2012) characterized women of color in academia as a "vulnerable minority," highlighting the systemic challenges they face. Mosley (1980) revealed that Black female administrators often feel isolated and marginalized, with limited peer support and significant barriers to influencing institutional decision-making processes. This sense of alienation is compounded by perceptions of being overworked, underpaid, and undervalued. Nieves-Squires (1991) identified specific challenges for Latina administrators, who grapple with reconciling the communal values of their cultural background with the competitive, goal-oriented nature of academic culture. Similarly, Hune (1998) found that Asian-American administrators

often feel marginalized, with their contributions undervalued. Curtis-Boles et al. (2012) suggested that for women of color to achieve professional success, they must navigate a complex landscape of expectations, often at the cost of their personal identity and values. This adaptation may shield them from some external experiences of marginalization but risks eroding their sense of self and authenticity. These studies collectively underscore the nuanced and multifaceted challenges faced by women of color in CDO positions, highlighting the need for further research and support to navigate these dynamics effectively and authentically.

In exploring the narratives surrounding women of color, it's evident that their layered identities are often perceived as burdensome within professional settings. Yet, Shorter-Gooden (2012) introduces a transformative perspective termed "positive marginality" (p. 167), which reinterprets these experiences as empowering. This concept illustrates how women of color utilize their identities as a source of strength in diversity-related endeavors, highlighting their capacity to contribute distinct values to academic institutions. Allen (2012) shares a personal reflection on how, despite facing discrimination as a Black woman, her identity fostered a sense of cultural pride and enabled her to recognize the added value of her "outsider-within status" (p. 102) in organizational contexts. Further expanding on this, Shorter-Gooden (2012) notes that such a status endows women of color with acute perceptiveness, an openness to diverse viewpoints, and the ingenuity to devise innovative solutions that promote a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. Curtis-Boles and colleagues (2012) regard these women as pioneers who not only impact individual lives but also ignite institutional transformations in policy and practice.

Historically, women of color have transcended these obstacles, laying the groundwork for contemporary achievements in academia. Nonetheless, the expectation to maintain resilience and

optimism amidst persistent institutional biases presents a significant strain (Winters, 2020). Post-COVID-19 discussions on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEI&J) initiatives have amplified conversations about dismantling systemic barriers facing Black professionals. Despite increased awareness, there remains a gap in accountability and actionable solutions (Melaku, 2020). Women of color in leadership roles not only act as mentors and exemplars for the younger generation but also enrich the workplace with diverse perspectives and experiential insights. Their unique positions, especially as CDOs, offer an unparalleled platform for executive-level leadership in the realm of higher education, marking a trail for future leaders to follow (Nixon, 2013).

**Black Women in DEI&J**

The scholarly exploration into racial disparities within the educational sector, particularly for Black women in higher education, reveals significant underrepresentation. This underrepresentation is evident among the ranks of faculty and administration, where members of the Black community do not proportionally occupy these positions (Gray & Brooks, 2021). A closer look at the composition of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions across the United States, as of 2018, presents a demographic breakdown as follows: white males constitute 40%, white females 35%, Asian or Pacific Islander males 7%, Asian or Pacific Islander females 5%, and both Black males and females, as well as Hispanic males and females, each represent 3%. Additionally, individuals identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native or of two or more races each make up less than one percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Despite a year-on-year increase in the percentage of doctoral degrees earned by Black scholars, their representation among full-time faculty and administrators in U.S. higher education institutions remains below 6% (González & Harris, 2013; Pololi et al., 2010). Furthermore, while

Black female students account for 67% of all doctoral degrees awarded to Black candidates (De Brey et al., 2019), their transition into associate and professorial roles within academia has not seen a parallel rise. Black women, specifically in tenure-track positions, face stark underrepresentation, underscoring the persistent racial inequities that challenge the higher education landscape (Gray & Brooks, 2021). This discrepancy highlights the ongoing need for systemic changes to foster inclusivity and equal representation within academic institutions.

**Background of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Racial Justice Movements in 2020**

The year 2020 marked an unparalleled period worldwide, impacting the United States with the onset of a global health crisis, significant economic challenges, and a surge in populist movements. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the critical issue of another pervasive crisis, notably highlighted in May 2020 with the tragic death of George Floyd. This event catalyzed a nationwide reflection on long-standing socioeconomic inequities and systemic racial and ethnic discrimination, particularly affecting Black and Hispanic (or Latinx) communities. These groups have faced not only heightened health risks from COVID-19 but also increased exposure to systemic injustices, including police violence, as evidenced by daily discussions and media reporting (Campbell & Hribernik, 2020). The pandemic underscored the underlying vulnerabilities, inequalities, and instability within the U.S., revealing how systemic disparities disproportionately affect BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities, leading to higher mortality rates compared to white populations, as confirmed by various studies and data including those from the Centers for Disease Control (2021) and scholars (Galea & Abdalla, 2020; Hooper et al., 2020; Njoku, 2021; Talevi et al., 2020; Wakeel & Njoku, 2021; Xiong et al., 2020; Yearby, 2018). The swift transition to online education necessitated by the pandemic also exacerbated mental health challenges among college

students, unveiling profound mental health crises and disparities, with BIPOC students, faculty, and staff enduring significant psychological burdens. This group reported higher rates of depression than their white counterparts, further compounding the chronic stress and trauma faced by these communities (Harder & McGowan, 2020; Kim et al., 2022).

*Social Unrest and Political Turmoil*

During a period marked by racial tension and national upheaval, Black women in academia were compelled to navigate their professional lives amidst the backdrop of significant societal challenges. The year 2020, characterized by widespread social and political instability coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, was forecasted to be a precursor to further disturbances in the United States, a prediction highlighted by Njoku and Evans (2022). The events that unfolded at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, aimed at disputing the 2020 presidential election results, led to a tragic outcome with the loss of five law enforcement lives (Barry et al., 2021). This episode underscored the evident racial disparities in law enforcement's response when comparing the relatively restrained handling of the predominantly white participants of the Capitol insurrection to the aggressive tactics employed against the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrators, resulting in over 14,000 arrests (Morrison, 2021).

The aftermath of the insurrection saw academic leaders nationwide, including college presidents and provosts, vocally denouncing the violence that breached the Capitol, reflecting a collective stance within the educational sphere against the turmoil (Whitford, 2021). Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, systemic racism, and public dissent, Black women in academia found themselves in a position where they had to continue their professional duties—leading, teaching, and supporting their communities—while simultaneously managing the personal impact of these events without the space to privately mourn or process the collective

grief affecting their communities (Lloyd, 2021; Paz, 2021). This period highlighted the resilience and fortitude of Black women in higher education as they navigated the complexities of their roles in an environment of heightened societal unrest.

### *Black Women and COVID-19*

In the field of academia, the COVID-19 crisis has further deepened disparities, particularly affecting faculty members of color, with a pronounced impact on Black women academics, reflecting broader societal inequities (Gray & Brooks, 2021). The pandemic has inflicted disproportionate health and economic burdens on BIPOC communities in the U.S., intensifying existing systemic inequalities within higher education settings. Amidst this crisis, faculty members of color, especially Black faculty, found themselves facing increased responsibilities, including caregiving, facilitating remote learning for their children, managing financial instability, and mourning the loss of family members, all while supporting their students emotionally (Mickey et al., 2020). Black women faculty members, in particular, faced significant physical, emotional, and economic hardships (Oleschuk, 2020). This situation underscores the need to explore the resilience and coping strategies of Black women in academia as they employ trauma-informed approaches in educating students amidst personal adversities, societal unrest, and the search for support mechanisms. It also highlights the imperative for leadership within educational institutions to implement supportive measures for Black women navigating these multifaceted challenges. The ongoing disparities brought to light by the pandemic, alongside persistent economic and social inequities, necessitate further investigation into the experiences of Black women in academic environments to inform targeted support strategies (Chance, 2021).

*Health Disparities*

Per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021), the SARS-CoV-2 virus, belonging to the coronavirus family responsible for respiratory illnesses, was initially identified in 2019, escalating into a worldwide health emergency by March 2020. The toll has been heavy, with more than 947,000 fatalities, upwards of 79 million infections, and vaccinations surpassing 547 million. The pandemic has severely affected historically marginalized groups, with these populations experiencing an elevated number of deaths, increased instances of severe illness, hospitalizations, and higher mortality rates from chronic conditions and COVID-19 (Njoku, 2021). This crisis underscored the vulnerabilities in the U.S. infrastructure and the unequal allocation of resources, spotlighting the enduring systemic obstacles and discriminatory health policies that have resulted in higher infection and mortality rates among racial and ethnic minority groups (Njoku et al., 2021b). While disparities have been a longstanding issue in the U.S., the COVID-19 crisis has further exposed the health inequities existing between BIPOC communities and their white counterparts. A specific focus on the African American population during the pandemic revealed they are twice as likely as white individuals to know someone personally who has been hospitalized or died due to COVID-19 (Pew Research Center, 2020), increasing the risk of indirect trauma from witnessing the distress and loss within their communities (Sneed et al., 2020). The pandemic has also exacerbated challenges in academia, affecting work-life balance and scholarly productivity across gender, race, parental status, and health, with Black women particularly impacted (Gray & Brooks, 2021; Laster Pirtle & Wright, 2021).

*Police Brutality*

Throughout the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, the African American community has faced a disproportionate burden of police violence, as documented in numerous studies (Alang et al., 2017; Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015; Njoku et al., 2021b). In the pandemic's early stages, instances of police brutality, highlighted by the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, dominated social media feeds and news broadcasts, capturing the attention of individuals confined to their homes. The issue reached a critical juncture on May 25, 2020, Memorial Day, when George Floyd's brutal killing by police officers sparked global protests against the systemic injustices endured by Black Americans, as detailed by Njoku and colleagues (2021). Academic research underscores that racial and health inequities are exacerbated during public health crises (Bolin & Kurtz, 2018; Coleman, 2020; Fothergill et al., 1999). The legacy of police violence against Black Americans, tracing back to the early 1700s, persists today, manifesting in disproportionate physical harm and fatalities (DeGue et al., 2016), societal racism, psychological distress, and systematic disenfranchisement (Alang, 2017; Winters, 2020). Moreover, the interplay between police brutality and the COVID-19 pandemic may amplify virus transmission within African American communities, fueled by the compounded stress of police encounters and a heightened police presence (Feldman et al., 2016; Krieger et al., 2015; Onwuamaegbu, 2021; Rouhandeh, 2020). Despite Black women constituting only 7% of the U.S. population, they represent 20% of unarmed victims of police killings since 1999 (Crenshaw et al., 2015), with Winter (2020) highlighting the profound mental, physical, and emotional toll of police brutality on Black women, significantly impacting their academic and professional environments.

Lloyd (2021) discovered that among various groups, Black women often feel the least valued and respected in professional settings. The shift to remote work during the pandemic served as a respite for many, sparing them from daily microaggressions and conversations with colleagues lacking empathy for their mental and emotional burdens (Onwuamaegbu, 2021). The repercussions of police violence extend into academia, affecting the students whom Black women educators' support. Research by Landertinger et al. (2021) indicates that widely broadcast incidents of police violence can traumatize students, deteriorate their mental health, and hinder the academic success of Black and Latinx college students. In the realm of higher education, Black women also confront racial and gender-based violence (Young & Hines, 2018). These encounters, along with structural racism and trauma stemming from police brutality— whether experienced directly or through narratives from those they assist (Bor et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2022)—act as significant psychosocial stressors for Black women.

### *Discrimination at Work*

Before the onset of COVID-19, Black women already encountered numerous obstacles due to the confluence of racial and gender discrimination in the professional realm, especially in academic fields where support systems were insufficient. Their career advancement and leadership opportunities were significantly influenced by the interplay of race and gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; De Brey et al., 2019), necessitating a delicate balance between meeting external expectations and remaining true to their authentic selves (Washington et al., 2021). The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately affecting Black women in the labor market (Gould & Wilson, 2020). Discrimination persisted in the post-pandemic workplace, notably within higher education, where Black women continue to face systemic biases (De Brey et al., 2019).

These women are often subject to pervasive stereotypes rooted in racist, sexist, and classist ideologies (Crenshaw, 1991; Erete et al., 2021), which unjustly portray them as undeserving beneficiaries of affirmative action (Spraggins, 1998) and question their productivity in the workplace (Young & Hines, 2018). Such prejudices hinder their professional growth, leading to reduced access to employment and educational opportunities, as well as salary disparities when compared to their white male peers in academia (Aparicio, 1999; Turner, 2002). The entrenched racial and gender discrimination within the academic sphere limits their prospects for tenure-track positions (Walkington, 2017), often resulting in perceptions of inferiority among colleagues and students. Moreover, the challenge of navigating multiple identities in the workplace is intensified by the prevailing Eurocentric cultural norms, which dictate standards of beauty, hair, and identity expression (A. H. Wingfield, 2008). This cultural imposition adds another layer of complexity to the discrimination faced by Black women, reinforcing the systemic barriers that limit their professional and personal expression (T. A. Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Winters, 2020).

The journey of Black women within the United States higher education landscape is a testament to resilience amid enduring challenges. These challenges encompass disparities in compensation, power imbalances, restricted access to mentorship, the impact of white privilege, experiences of isolation, the phenomenon of tokenism, and hindrances in career progression (Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Lechuga-Peña, 2022; Taylor et al., 2009). Additionally, Black women in positions of influence, including those holding tenure or administrative leadership roles, often navigate self-expression cautiously in terms of beauty, hair, and identity to adhere to the mainstream culture's expectations, thereby safeguarding their professional standing in environments where their competence has been firmly established (Gray & Brooks, 2021; T. A.

Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Wingfield, 2008). Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of educational leadership, breaking through barriers and significantly enriching the sector. As pioneers, advocates, and scholars, they have championed educational access and social equity, notwithstanding systemic obstacles and limited access. Their ascendancy to roles such as college presidents, deans, and administrators underscores their pivotal role in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, thereby challenging conventional norms and fostering communities that value and support underrepresented groups.

The leadership of Black women in academia has played a crucial role in shaping policy, advocating for educational accessibility, and nurturing inclusive academic environments that empower all community members. Their enduring strength, commitment, and vision have motivated future generations and contributed to the dynamic evolution and betterment of higher education. Amidst calls for increased representation of Black faculty and administrative figures since the civil rights movement (Mosley, 1980; Wolfe, 2010), Black women's representation in leadership within higher education remains under ten percent in the U.S., highlighting a stark underrepresentation (Gardner et al., 2014; Njoku & Evans, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic brought together students, faculty, and administrators in an unprecedented collaborative effort to navigate the crisis. Nevertheless, this period also illuminated the ongoing disparities faced by Black women in academia, exacerbating feelings of racial fatigue, isolation, and undervaluation, adversely affecting their mental well-being and career paths (Chancellor, 2019; Gary & Brooks, 2021; Mickey et al., 2020; Winter, 2020).

**Theoretical Frameworks and Theories**

Throughout this study, the researcher guided all relevant stakeholders through an interview process grounded in appreciative inquiry, to cultivate an environment of trust and

productive dialog. With appreciative inquiry, the research revolved around the principle of simultaneity for inquiry to spark change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013). This approach will intersect with theories within critical constructivism, such as CRT (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) critical race feminism (Wing, 1997), social capital theory (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999) and community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2016), to build a framework for developing solutions to overcome obstacles, and creating a plan for implementation of a new framework that bolsters the voices and experience of Black women DEI practitioners and helps institutions see the barriers that must fall in order to hire and retain this population of professionals

*Theoretical Framework*

This study employed appreciative inquiry, to cultivate an environment of trust and productive dialog. With appreciative inquiry, the research revolved around the principle of simultaneity for inquiry to spark change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). This approach intersected with theories within critical constructivism, such as CRT (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)  critical race feminism (Wing, 1997), social capital theory (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999) and community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2016), to build a framework for developing solutions to overcome obstacles, and creating a plan for implementation of a new framework that bolsters the voices and experience of Black women DEI&J practitioners and helps institutions see the barriers that must fall in order to hire and retain this population of professionals.

*Frameworks*

**Appreciative Inquiry.** Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013) is a strengths-based approach that focuses on identifying and amplifying positive aspects within a

given context. In this research, the researcher would employ this framework to uncover the existing strengths, successes, and assets within a community or organization. By emphasizing positive narratives and experiences, I can create a foundation for understanding the potential for growth and improvement. his approach aims to highlight successful strategies and empower narratives that can inform and inspire others in the field. By examining the positive aspects of their experiences, the paper acknowledges the agency and resilience of Black women practitioners in navigating and challenging the existing power dynamics and structures within higher education institutions.

**Social Capital Theory.** Social capital theory (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999) focuses on the social connections, networks, and resources available within a community or organization. Incorporating this theory, the researcher would examine the relationships, trust, and shared norms that contribute to social cohesion and cooperation. This framework would help me understand the role of social capital in fostering community resilience, resource mobilization, and collective action. Additionally, this framework give opportunity to explore how Black women DEI practitioners mobilize their social networks, relationships, and resources within higher education institutions. This framework examines the connections and support systems these practitioners leverage to navigate and influence change. By understanding the social capital that exists within their professional circles, the paper examines how Black women practitioners form alliances, collaborate with colleagues, and build coalitions to challenge systemic inequities and advocate for inclusive practices.

**Community Cultural Wealth Theory.** Community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2006) recognizes and values the diverse forms of cultural knowledge and capital that individuals from marginalized communities possess. The researcher would utilize this framework to explore the

cultural strengths, practices, and assets within the community under study. By acknowledging and leveraging these cultural resources, I can promote empowerment and social change within the community. By incorporating community cultural wealth theory to recognize and value the cultural strengths, knowledge, and skills that Black women DEI practitioners bring to their work. This framework acknowledges the diverse forms of cultural capital often overlooked or undervalued in traditional academic settings. By appreciating and amplifying the cultural wealth that Black women practitioners possess, the paper sheds light on their unique contributions to DEI efforts in higher education and challenges the notion of what constitutes valuable expertise within the field.

**Critical Constructivism Theories.** Building upon appreciative inquiry, the research also integrated theories within critical constructivism, such as CRT (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) critical race feminism (Wing, 1997), social capital theory (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999) and community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2016), to critically examine the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape the identified strengths and positive experiences. This theory recognizes that knowledge and experiences are socially constructed and shaped by larger systems of power. By adopting a critical lens, the paper delves into the underlying dynamics and systemic issues that Black women DEI practitioners face, addressing issues such as structural inequalities, racial biases, and institutional barriers that may hinder their success and well-being.

**Critical Race Theory.** CRT (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) examines the intersections of race, power, and institutionalized racism. To apply this theory, the researcher analyzed how race and racism manifest within the social structures, policies, and practices of the context under investigation. CRT serves as a foundation for understanding the systemic nature of

racism and how it is embedded in institutions. This framework would help me identify and challenge systemic inequalities and discrimination.

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights the interconnectedness of various social identities and systems of oppression. Intersectionality complements CRT by considering how race, gender, and other social categories intersect to shape the experiences of Black women within the DEI field in higher education. By understanding the unique challenges faced by individuals with multiple marginalized identities, I can develop a more comprehensive analysis.

**Critical Race Feminism.** Critical race feminism (Wing, 1997) examines the intersection of race, gender, and power dynamics. This theoretical framework would enable me to investigate how race, gender, and other factors influence social, political, and economic structures. It would help me uncover the experiences and perspectives of marginalized women and explore the ways in which they challenge and resist oppression.

**Summary of Theoretical Framework Integration**

In synthesizing various theoretical perspectives, this investigation offered a nuanced and thorough exploration of the realities faced by Black women working in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) roles within higher education institutions. It delved into their achievements and strengths while meticulously assessing the systemic forces influencing their professional journeys. The research highlighted the intricate interplay of race, gender, and authority, employing critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, and critical race feminism as interpretive frameworks. Additionally, it scrutinized the support networks and resources beneficial to these DEI practitioners, utilizing social capital theory, and recognized the unique cultural contributions they offer, as conceptualized by community cultural wealth theory. This comprehensive

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approach facilitated a detailed insight into the obstacles, tactics, and prospects for transformation encountered by Black women in the DEI sphere of higher education.

**Best Practices in the Field**

Black women diversity practitioners face a plethora of challenges while navigating multiple marginalized identities in the historically exclusionary field of higher education. To combat the social, political and economic challenges faced, these practitioners have developed approaches to maneuver through, resist and in some instances, dismantle oppressive structures within their field. For the purpose of this paper, these strategies will be defined as beat practices.

*Agency*

Bandura (2006) stated that humans play an active role in navigating the environment which they inherit, rather than passively allowing the environment they live in to control their decisions. The term self-efficacy describes the confidence an individual has in themself to exert control over their own motivation, behavior, and social environment to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977). Further, self-efficacy is a foundational element of human agency. The policies and practices that provide a layout for an organization to operate must happen repeatedly for them to evolve into institutional norms; meaning that these structures are flexible at their core and have the ability to be changed (Baez, 2000; Middlehurst, 1997). Baez (2000) defined agency as a necessary action to resist the norms of the dominant culture and maintained that through this purposeful action of resistance, individuals are provided opportunities to reshape these structures. For example, individuals from BIPOC communities may feel internal or external pressure to participate in diversity-related services within their workplace (Baez, 2000; Turner et al., 2008), and in doing so take part in invisible labor which requires balancing service, scholarship and social well-being. Despite the potential for a negative

professional impact by engaging in this additional work, BIPOC individuals that engage in these services in higher education are exercising agency that provide them with social and political benefits (Baez, 2000). These benefits such as, community with other faculty from BIPOC communities, feelings of contribution to the advancement of their marginalized community, and a platform to validate their lived experiences. Furthermore, the participation in these services allow these individuals to serve as catalysts for redefining norms and institutional assumptions of scholarship and diversity in higher education (Baez, 2000; Sulé, 2011). The majority of CDOs are women from BIPOC communities. While establishing diversity programming, addressing legacies of exclusionary practices and redrawing structural practices of their organization, the women in these positions must also properly navigate social expectations to avoid being labeled as "diversity mascots" or the representative of diversity for their higher education institution (Niemann, 2012; D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Moreover, while operating in this capacity, Black women diversity practitioners must arrange personally and publicly the degree to which they will bend with or resist dominant ideologies that are embedded in the United States higher education system (Collins, 2000; Montoya, 1994). The challenges faced by Black women in higher education provide insight to why Black women diversity practitioners in higher education must exercise effective agency in their efforts to prompt lasting change at their higher education institution.

### *Multiple Consciousness*

Literature surrounding women from BIPOC communities maintains that professional growth is stifled by the compilation of racial and gender stereotyping through constant categorization in higher education creates a sense of otherness (Melaku, 2019); these feelings of otherness, could best be understood as operating in an outsider status. The negative experiences

shared by women from BIPOC communities in higher education highlight that persistent marginality can promote the development of strategies and self-efficacy to navigate through diverse environments and overcome barriers (Baez, 2000; Sulé, 2011; Turner, 2002). hooks (1984) shares that those who reside on the outskirts of society, but maneuver through it and in turn develop understanding of how the margins and center of society operate have a unique lens through which they see reality. Individuals that exist in the center do not, perhaps cannot, understand the reality in which the outskirts operate. Having the capacity to access and negotiate the system holistically, including the center and outskirts, establishes an adverse worldview (hooks, 1984) that serves as a source of power for those whose identities intersect with marginalization.

Multiple consciousness is defined as an awareness of how a multiplicity of unequal systems operate harmoniously with one another (King, 1988); a survival tool developed by those experiencing multiple jeopardy. Women from BIPOC communities in academia have developed a duality of identity (Mitchell & Miller, 2011) which is advantageous to them professionally by offering them the opportunity to navigate and succeed in multiple spheres, rather than focusing on the dissonance they experience (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mitchell & Miller, 2011). Being able to examine the world through an insider and outsider lens simultaneously requires hyperfocus to make meaning of the experiences lived within oppressive systems. hooks (1984) charges women from BIPOC communities to acknowledge the unique vantage point multiple marginalities provide them, encourages them to use this perspective to critique dominant ideologies of race, class and sex, as well as call for counter-hegemony. Collins (2000) adds that the worldview of women from BIPOC communities creates positions of being an outsider-within, which provides them with an enlarged view of these intellectual and political

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entities. In higher education, women from BIPOC communities have crafted strategic approaches to persist and resist which are indispensable tools within their leadership toolbox (Jean-Marie, 2011), because they are not only confident in their abilities to perform, but are also have the capability to successfully discern and maneuver the professional terrain in which they work (Bass & Faircloth, 2011). Furthermore, this skill is defined as navigational capital (Yosso, 2006, 2016), an ability acquired by those in the BIPOC community, to negotiate institutions that were created to exclude them. As higher education institutions begin to acknowledge the wide spectrum of capabilities required to be a successful leader, women from BIPOC communities who currently operate within marginal institutional spaces may find themselves in high demand for executive level positions (Hamilton, 2004).

**Challenges for Black Women in DEI&J**

Although there are higher education institutions that are ill-prepared for how our society is diversifying, many are being proactive by hiring CDOs to assist with these efforts. While this role provides the opportunity for a CDO to effect positive change, this position also comes with a multiplicity of challenges. CDOs require support from other executive level leaders at their institution to be effective. Even with this support, CDOs must have the ability to maneuver seamlessly through their institution which requires structural, political, symbolic, and collegial strategies that is unique from other senior-level positions on campus, to lead diversity focused change (D. A. Williams, 2013). CDOs operate in contradiction while simultaneously being visible yet invisible, holding an executive position with limited resources, and receiving positive recognition while feeling tokenized, leading to 36% of Black women intending to leave their current employment, rather than remain in this paradox (Center for Talent Innovation, 2019).

Implementing diversity initiatives in an environment that does not support an equitable

workplace culture will unavoidably exacerbate attrition (Melaku, 2019).

*Legitimacy*

The endeavor to authentically incorporate diversity initiatives within higher education

remains challenging, with doubts persisting over their recognition as essential needs (Barceló,

2007). There's a debate over merely appointing a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) for appearances

or establishing a substantial framework that empowers them to address diversity-related

challenges effectively on campus. While restructuring management positions and organizational

frameworks is a conventional method to signal a commitment to change (Bolman & Deal, 2008;

Green, 2008), it often risks embedding the issues further by isolating responsibility within a

single individual or symbolically suggesting progress without actual organizational

transformation (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This can lead to sidelining critical issues and dialogues

within the institution, with the effectiveness of these positions being questioned based on

tangible outcomes like reporting structures and budgetary control. D. A. Williams and Wade-

Golden (2007) observed that only 17% of CDOs had a comprehensive portfolio with sufficient

technical and administrative backing, whereas 45% had minimal to no staff, significantly

limiting their impact on key areas such as recruitment, assessment, and budget management. The

influence of CDOs largely depends on their capacity to inspire a commitment to diversity and

remain hopeful amidst opposition to change. Nevertheless, CDOs may face marginalization,

positioned at an executive level in title only, without the actual power typically derived from

control over finances, staffing, and policy decisions. Schneier (2008) critiqued the creation of

CDO roles as "diversity theater," a move to superficially enhance the institution's image on

diversity without substantial changes to its structure and culture. CDOs are often seen as the

moral compass of an institution (Fleigler, 2006; Pittard, 2010), tasked with addressing its

diversity challenges—a role fraught with expectations and positioned as a focal point for

criticism when tough choices are confronted. According to D. A. Williams and Wade-Golden

(2007), the limited authority granted to CDOs exposes institutions to potential resistance,

discord, and inefficient resource utilization.

*Isolation*

Despite holding a visible, executive level position which offers opportunity to address

complex issues, CDOs often feel isolated while operating within a vulnerable infrastructure

(Hernandez, 2010; Pittard, 2010; Stuart, 2010). CDOs can be cut off from their communities by

virtue of their positions in the institution. BIPOC CDOs have described the requirements of their

roles and lack of legitimacy as an easy opportunity to be made invisible, while also needing to

tread carefully to avoid being ostracized for speaking out in some way (Nixon, 2013). Mitchell

and Miller (2011) explained that loneliness is a reality for many women of color in academia

both socially and professionally. They experience limited access to mentors, invitations for

collaboration, and participation in the social outings of the institution. This isolation extends into

workplace collegiality, respect, and validation, which is one of the best supports a faculty

member can obtain by fostering a sense of community and creativity. Operating in isolation

diminishes the awareness women of color have about whether they are working in the best ways

possible. Due to a lack of critical mass on higher education campuses, Erickson and Rodriguez

(1999) share that these women have a difficult time learning spoken and unspoken rules of

navigating these spaces, finding professional opportunities or knowing who to watch out for.

Mitchell and Miller (2011) maintain that women of color need be wary of the information they

share and whom they confide in at their workplace. Moreover, CDOs expressed the need to

guard against their vulnerability; however, being limited to sharing information may detrimentally affect their effectiveness and longevity.

### *Politicization of Body and Voice*

Studies on Black professionals highlight the complexities of navigating racial identity within the workplace, revealing that a full expression of their racial identity often leads to adverse perceptions and consequences (Wingfield, 2015). These perceptions significantly influence the treatment of Black professionals in predominantly white workplaces, which adhere to traditional norms that systematically marginalize BIPOC communities. A poignant illustration of such dynamics is the debate over Black hair in professional settings. The expression of racial identity through natural hairstyles, such as braids, locs, or voluminous curls, has been criticized as "overly Black," necessitating legislative measures like the CROWN Act (2019) to safeguard Black individuals' rights to embrace their natural hair without discrimination (Bryant, 2019; Donahoo, 2021). This need to moderate expressions of Blackness, to avoid being perceived as "too Black," underscores the challenges Black professionals face. Goffman (1959) observed the significant effort Black professionals invest in managing impressions, especially in expressing emotions like anger or frustration, to circumvent stereotypes, such as the "angry Black woman" stereotype in professional settings. Melaku (2020) also noted that Black women professionals often take extra care in composing emails to ensure their tone is not perceived as aggressive. Carbado and Gulati (1999) discuss that, like all employees, individuals from marginalized groups are compelled to cultivate and display a work identity that aligns with workplace expectations. In the context of higher education, Black women frequently find themselves combating negative stereotypes, necessitating extensive identity work to mitigate these perceptions (Melaku, 2020).

This ongoing management of how one's identity is perceived in the workplace proves to be an exhaustive endeavor, draining individuals emotionally, mentally, and physically.

### *Invisible Labor*

Black women in professional environments often confront the challenge of unseen labor stemming from tokenization. Despite the appointment of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), it is common for Black women to be disproportionately selected to participate in diversity-related committees, in contrast to their white male peers (Winters, 2020). This selection is partly due to the underrepresentation of Black women in academia, compelling those present to represent broader Black experiences, overshadowing their individual qualifications and the roles they were initially hired for. Their involvement on such committees, positioned as racial issue specialists, adds to their workload without offering additional remuneration, potentially hindering their advancement opportunities in comparison to white colleagues. This dynamic not only places an undue burden on Black women but also highlights the absence of white males from diversity initiatives, underscoring a systemic inequity. Participation is often perceived as mandatory, risking their perception as detached from their primary job duties if they prioritize committee work, which could lead to negative career implications (Melaku, 2020).

Furthermore, Black professionals encounter an "inclusion tax" within predominantly white spaces, adopting strategies like code-switching and altering their presentation to navigate these environments, resulting in cumulative personal and professional strain (Goffman, 1959; Winters, 2020). While such survival tactics might be seen by some as compromising integrity, others deem them essential for resilience and success (Harris, 2007; Mitchell & Miller, 2011; Montoya, 1994). The dilemma for many Black women lies in choosing to adapt, challenge, or conform to the prevailing institutional culture for survival and potential career progression. This

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negotiation requires significant time, energy, and resources, a demand not placed on members of the dominant culture or recognized by higher education institutions.

*Social Identity*

The literature on how Chief Diversity Officers' (CDOs) multifaceted identities influence their roles in academia is limited (Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Research that does exist reveals CDOs encounter numerous obstacles, including feelings of marginalization, tokenism, insufficient support, resources, and authority, along with managing the disproportionate expectations placed on them by other BIPOC individuals within academic institutions (Baez, 2000; W. A. Smith et al., 2009). Aguirre and Martinez (2006) discuss the unique pressures experienced by university leaders from underrepresented groups, including heightened demands from students belonging to marginalized communities, expectations that often surpass what these leaders can realistically fulfill. These CDOs find themselves navigating the delicate balance between advocating for their communities and dispelling doubts of having compromised their integrity (W. A. Smith et al., 2009), all the while ensuring they promote fairness and success for various campus groups. This complex balancing act can lead to feelings of isolation and burnout, as they grapple with being symbols for their communities while their individuality is either overlooked or scrutinized (W. A. Smith, 2009). Considering that the majority of CDOs in higher education are women from BIPOC backgrounds (D. A.Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007), it's crucial to understand how their intersecting identities shape their professional experiences.

**Women of Color in Leadership Positions**

Ryu and American Council on Higher Education (2010) note that despite incremental increases of BIPOC women among higher education faculty, they continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles in higher education institutions as shown in Table 1. BIPOC

women constitute 8.6%of all full-time higher education administrator positions (Ryu &

American Council on Higher Education, 2010), and among those positions, individuals from

BIPOC and women communities were more likely to hold CDO roles than any other position

(Jaschik, 2008; see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Executive Level Administrators*

| | Executive Vice President | Provost/Chief Academic Office | Academic College Dean | Chief Student Affairs Officer | Chief Diversity Officer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race / Ethnicity | | | | | |
| White | 79.8% | 90.5% | 85.8% | 79.7% | 17.6% |
| Black | 12.3% | 5.0% | 7.2% | 13.3% | 59.0% |
| Asian American | 1.9% | 1.9% | 2.8% | 0.8% | 4.5% |
| American Indian | 0.0% | 0.2% | 0.5% | 0.4% | 3.9% |
| Hispanic | 6.0% | 2.4% | 2.4% | 5.4% | 13.2% |
| Other | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.3% | 0.3% | 1.7% |
| Gender | | | | | |
| Female | 31.0% | 38.0% | 35.5% | 45.4% | 55.6% |
| Male | 69.0% | 62.0% | 64.5% | 54.6% | 44.4% |

*Note:* Adapted from "Next Generation President," by S. Jaschik, 2008, *Inside Higher Education.*

Jaschik's (2008) quantitative analysis underscores the pioneering nature of women of

color in leadership positions within higher education (Montoya, 1994), often serving as the

embodiment of their communities' behaviors and attitudes. This scenario amplifies their

visibility, as outlined by Turner (2002), marking their tenure with unique challenges. They navigate the terrain of tokenism, where their missteps are viewed as reflective of their entire demographic, and their achievements are dismissed as anomalies, challenging the stereotypes their presence supposedly contradicts (Niemann, 2012). Such circumstances intensify their sense of solitude and deepen their sense of marginalization, particularly in the absence of mentorship from peers who share similar backgrounds and could offer guidance through the intricacies of academia and resistance to oppression (Holling et al., 2012; Montoya, 1994).

González and Harris (2013) highlight a specific predicament faced by BIPOC women, who are often recruited by so-called allies. These allies may initially support these women but can become patronizing, take credit for their successes, label them as beneficiaries of affirmative action ignoring that white women have significantly benefited from such policies through civil rights legislation, as Delgado (1991) points out, and withdraw their support upon hearing opposing viewpoints. The confluence of race and gender places Black women in a distinctively different reality from their white counterparts in the U.S., confronting them with layers of oppression that include racism, sexism, and classism (Crenshaw, 1991; Erete et al., 2021). The challenge of traversing these intersections in the context of higher education is exacerbated by a lack of institutional backing and mentorship, alongside the visible effects of race and gender on their professional advancement (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Despite these hurdles, Black women in academia are tasked with persevering, navigating expectations of authenticity while balancing their career and personal life (Washington et al., 2021).

**Multiple Marginalized Identities**

Research on multiple marginalized identities suggest that the challenges faced by CDOs may be intensified for BIPOC women serving in this role (Turner, 2002; Turner et al., 2011;

Ward, 2004). Dovidio (2012) explains how BIPOC women must navigate this multiple jeopardy that manifests from racially being perceived through the standards illustrated by men within their minority group while also combating gendered scrutiny by being judged by the standards tailored to white women. Experiences of multiple marginality results in BIPOC women CDOs feeling tokenized and overlooked among racial and gender lines. This multiplicative effect on the discrimination that these women experience presents as feeling the need to:

be more on display; feeling more pressure to conform, to make fewer mistakes; becoming socially invisible; finding it harder to gain credibility; being more isolated; being more likely to be excluded from informal peer networks, having limited sources of power through alliances; having fewer opportunities to be sponsored; facing misperceptions of their identity and role in the organization; being stereotyped; facing more personal stress (Turner, 2002, p. 76).

Those who are presumed to not align with cultural norms of the institution are subjected to stereotypes, microaggressions, threats, and discrimination (González & Harris, 2013). The more one differs from higher education norms established by white, heterosexual, upper-middle-class males, the less privileges are offered because success requires a high level of assimilation to the actions and behaviors of the dominant culture (Collins, 2000; González & Harris, 2013; Mitchell & Miller, 2011; Montoya, 1994). Compared to men and white women, BIPOC women have fewer opportunities for acceptance within the institutional culture due to their embodiment of multiple identities outside the traditional norms of academia (Harris, 2007; hooks, 1984; Mertz, 2011). The dominant culture has a homogenized pull on BIPOC men and white women, who have both experienced comparable degree of advancement in higher education, many times at the

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expense of other historically excluded groups, whose continued oppression white women and BIPOC men may actually support (hooks, 1984).

The presence of Black women in authoritative roles within higher education often stirs discomfort, as characteristics like assertiveness and ambition, widely accepted in other demographics, are mischaracterized as overly masculine. Their work might not receive the same acknowledgment as their male counterparts, with their contributions either overlooked or subjected to excessive scrutiny, sometimes interpreted as overly ambitious. Bass and Faircloth (2011) highlight the paradoxical existence that BIPOC women navigate, adopting personas that clash with their personal convictions as a mechanism to endure in roles such as Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), within systems seemingly designed for their failure (Harris, 2007). The plight of BIPOC, particularly Black women, is exacerbated by ingrained structures of oppression where race and gender converge, leading to compounded, frequently adverse effects (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Essed, 1991).

The distinct challenges Black women face in professional settings are shaped by their dual identity as both women and members of the BIPOC community, which places them at a specific juncture within the social hierarchy. This positioning demands an intersectional lens to fully grasp the complexities of their experiences, which include a scarcity of representation in academic circles, routine racial and gender-based microaggressions, and the marginalization of their voices (Collins, 1986; González & Harris, 2013). Understanding these nuanced obstacles through such a framework is crucial to acknowledging the unique adversities faced by women of color in the workforce.

**Racism and Aggression**

A microaggression refers to subtle, everyday verbal or non-verbal behaviors, actions, or comments that communicate derogatory or negative messages towards individuals or groups based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other marginalized identities. These actions, often unintentional or unconsciously expressed, can reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate discrimination, and create a hostile or unwelcoming environment. Microaggressions can manifest in various forms, such as dismissive gestures, insensitive jokes, invalidating assumptions, or subtle acts of exclusion. Despite being subtle or indirect, microaggressions can have a cumulative impact on the mental, emotional, and social well-being of individuals experiencing them, contributing to feelings of alienation, self-doubt, and marginalization. Recognizing and addressing microaggressions is essential for creating inclusive spaces and promoting equity and respect for all individuals.

While microaggressions is a commonly used term, "the impact can be 'macro' on Black people" (Winters, 2020, p. 124), thus will be dropped and be called aggressions, assaults, insults and invalidations throughout this section. Research suggests that the complexity of DEI&J efforts can be emotionally taxing for practitioners and participants (Evans & Moore, 2015; Porter et al., 2018), with diversity professionals comparing their work to smashing their head against a brick wall (Ahmed, 2012). In higher education, Black women CDOs encounter the challenge of establishing strategies for navigating racial and gender stereotypes and aggressions, and face pressure to decide whether or not to address the aggressions and insults that communicate humiliation and exclusion (Holder et al., 2007; Winters, 2020). Furthermore, when faced with these aggressions, Black women may feel the need to maintain a positive attitude, especially when they encounter microaggression and exclusion. Montoya (1994) characterized pressure of

overcompensating to ensure the actions and behaviors of Black women countered potential

stereotyping, including: being acutely aware of tone of voice and gestures, working long hours

and maintain a positive disposition regardless of who they are tasked to work with, which could

also manifest itself as difficulty in saying no to anyone, particularly white people and men. Black

women report distancing herself from aggressions that take place at work as a way to cope and

continue working but find themselves feeling bitter and disenfranchised. These experiences have

a negative impact on the emotional and psychological health of these women in higher education

(Bass & Faircloth, 2011; Mitchell & Miller, 2011), indicating a considerable commitment of

time to anticipating and responding to potential scenarios if they display frustration with their

colleagues. The women in these CDO roles must navigate potential personal and professional

landmines to negotiate stereotypes and aggression.

**Masking**

Montoya (1994) describes an outer persona or mask many BIPOC women have

developed as a strategy to navigate the tensions of higher education. The mask functions to

navigate the concurrent engagement in and resistance to gendered, racialized presentations and

interactions. Montoya (1994) describes the masks these women wear as intrinsically self-loathing

due to the way they disparage the identities and experiences in favor of the dominant ideology to

achieve success. However, these masks are a key piece of protection for BIPOC women to

sustain the core pieces of their identities (Mitchell & Miller, 2011; Montoya, 1994). Overall, the

creation and wearing of these masks can be destructive to the psychological, emotional and

physical health of BIPOC women who can be diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and

depression as a result of the persistent stress correlated with impression management, navigating

conversations on race and gender issues, and performing their workplace responsibilities (González & Harris, 2013; Winters, 2020).

**Post-COVID-19**

The confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism, as identified by the American Psychological Association (2020), has notably impacted Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEI&J) initiatives within medical and academic institutions nationwide. These dual pandemics prompted a shift in the discourse, highlighting language, perspectives, and actions central to DEI&J efforts, signaling potential lasting changes in organizational structures (D. Anand & Hsu, 2020; *Anti-Racism in Higher Education*, 2022; Beachum et al., 2022; W. A. Smith, 2006). In the wake of racial unrest in the United States, numerous organizations pledged to eliminate systemic racism and foster environments more inclusive of BIPOC individuals (Baalbaki, 2019; Jones, 2021). Traditionally, BIPOC women in the workplace have navigated challenges such as insufficient support and mentorship, cultural exclusion, perception management, building professional relationships, and restricted access to professional growth opportunities (García, 2019; Jeffries, 2015; Turner et al., 2008). Amid the pandemic, there was a push for progress via DEI&J-focused initiatives and training sessions. However, Black women professionals report minimal changes in leadership approaches to racial and gender equity, suggesting a continuity with pre-pandemic practices (Walton et al., 2021). This sentiment is supported by quantitative data indicating persistently low representation of Black employees and high turnover rates, underscoring the ongoing need for comprehensive efforts towards achieving racial and gender equity in the workplace (M. Cook, 2020; T. R. Williams et al., 2023). Furthermore, the pandemic, alongside societal and political pressures, has amplified the invisible

labor and psychological burdens that Black women in academia bear, further compromising their

mental health and overall well-being (A. P. Harris, 2019).

### *Black at Work*

The COVID-19 pandemic required a shift to remote work which created additional

barriers for Black women to navigate their white workplaces. Black women share that the

additional barriers created stemmed from concern about their stress of managing the newly

combined home and work life, anxiety of maintaining appearances of being in control, and lack

of motivation and concentration on job responsibilities while coping with racial unrest in the

country (T. B. Johnson, 2021; Jeffries, 2015). Furthermore, these women also report that the

transition to remote work has caused the weak relationships with colleagues, pre-COVID, to

diminish even further, causing them to question their career trajectory and self-efficacy (A. P.

Harris, 2019). Trying to navigate remote workplace dynamics in an effort to maintain

professionalism and collegial interactions has intensified their experiences working in white

institutional spaces through heightened emotional and cognitive labor for many Black women –

manifesting in the form of the inclusion tax, resulting from implicit biases and stereotypes about

this group (Beeman, 2023; Melaku, 2022). Specifically, when beginning in leadership roles

during and closely following the social unrest and political turmoil of 2020, Black women have

noted awareness that their presence in leadership roles are not well received by all, and this was

exacerbated with colleagues attributing their new status to the benefit of social and political

collateral. Despite being in remote working conditions, Black women were still tasked with

providing psychological safety with their differences (Brown, 2018), hesitated sharing their full

identity with colleagues, and engaged in practices such as code switching, to ensure their

psychological safety and protect themselves from having to manage implicit biases and stereotypes attributed to Black women in white spaces (Clark, 2020).

## *Managing Emotions*

In the wake of social unrest, Black women professionals shared how they navigated managing emotions – their own and those of colleagues – in the workplace. The anxiety felt in the workplace is compounded for Black women as they confront the reality of racism across the United States while alleviating the reactions of others at the same time. This contributes to the fatigue faced by Black women in the workplace by often becoming the "de facto chief counselors and counselors" (Winters, 2020, p. 127) for their BIPOC colleagues, in addition to white peers who want to express their concern, confusion or counterarguments. For example, Melaku (2020) noted that Black women described feelings of devastation, anger, exhaustion, fear, and hopelessness upon learning about George Floyd's murder. While continuing to come to work the following days, one participant shared feelings of resentment and polarization for her white colleagues who seemed to be unaffected by the impact of these events on the life of their colleague (Melaku, 2020). These sentiments shared paralleled the feelings many Black people in the United States experienced following the murder of George Floyd and how they had to provide additional emotional and cognitive labor when deciding how to navigate the apathy shown in response to another incident of police brutality by white colleagues. These experiences continue to stifle the development of trusting relationships that build collegiality and inclusion in the workplace.

## *Trauma as Public Consumption for Learning*

In the wake of widespread public demonstrations against systemic racism and the visible instances of violence against Black individuals in the United States, Black professionals,

including those in various sectors, have increasingly been solicited by organizational leaders to lead conversations on race and share their personal narratives about life as Black Americans. Particularly, Black women find themselves at the forefront of organizational endeavors to enhance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEI&J), confronting challenges like emotional labor, re-experiencing trauma, and an increased workload related to DEI&J initiatives, all while fulfilling their regular job duties amidst the challenges of a global pandemic. These burdens have led to feelings of resentment towards their workplaces, as their personal encounters with racial discrimination and violence are utilized as educational content.

Ray (2019) highlights that during such periods, some individuals have opted out of participating in workplace dialogues that require them to share their experiences, citing feelings of vulnerability and tokenism. The spaces offered by organizations for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to disclose their racial and gender-based traumas are often hastily assembled in reaction to specific events, without adequate consideration of the emotional and psychological toll these disclosures entail. While it is crucial to heed the voices of marginalized communities, these actions underscore the pervasive racial biases in our society. Organizations need to recognize the burden placed on these individuals when they are asked to educate others about the traumas and microaggressions they endure regularly (Ray, 2019), and must reassess their approach to ensure it is truly supportive and not exploitative.

## Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

**Introduction**

      This study aimed to identify optimal strategies for Black women DEI&J professionals in academia to enhance their effectiveness amidst the socio-political upheavals of 2020, while also providing insights for academic institutions on how to create supportive work environments for these crucial roles. The decision to adopt a qualitative research framework (Creswell, 2005) emerged as the ideal method to explore the effective practices employed by Black women in DEI&J positions within higher education settings. The introductory section of this chapter revisits the research questions, delves into the study's rationale, and elaborates on the phenomenological approach that underpins this qualitative inquiry. It will further detail the study's design, including the safeguards for human subjects and the methodologies for gathering data. Given the significance of interviews in qualitative, phenomenological research, this section will also examine the interview procedures and strategies to uphold the study's integrity and reliability. Additionally, the chapter will discuss how the researcher addressed potential participant biases and the data analysis methods applied to derive the study's conclusions.

**Re-Statement of Research Questions**

      This chapter describes the research methods that were applied to achieve the objectives of this study, which is to primarily answer these four research questions:

- RQ1. What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education?

- RQ2. What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges?

- RQ3. How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success?

- RQ4. What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field?

**Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research is defined as an interpretive approach in which researchers construct meaning from observations of subjects, whether directly (e.g., in their natural environment) or indirectly (e.g., being interviewed; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is commonly employed by researchers when there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of a problem or issue, particularly in situations where an oppressed group encounters challenges or concerns (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2010). As a result, a qualitative study was determined to be an appropriate approach to determine best practices for Black women's DEI&J practitioners because of the complex nature of DEI, and social justice positions and initiatives in higher education. Qualitative research is defined as an interpretive approach, in which researchers construct meaning from observations of subjects, whether directly (e.g., in their natural environment) or indirectly (e.g., being interviewed; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nuttall et al. (2011) suggest qualitative research's fitness in identifying the implicit subtexts that connect human behaviors with outcomes. To completely understand the phenomenon being studied, qualitative researchers engage with the research directly through experiential contact (Hathaway, 1995). With qualitative research, data is collected through multiple forms such as, interviews, observations, questionnaires and document analysis (Creswell, 2013). Following data collection, researchers will use inductive and deductive logic to group participant responses into categories to help conceptualize and describe their lived experiences while working to view them

holistically (Creswell, 2013). Due to the diverse narratives of participants, researchers must take the categories created and develop themes based on the multiple participant perspectives shared, not concepts derived from the literature review (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, conducting qualitative research is a reflexive process where participants share their backgrounds and topic interests (Hathaway, 1995).

*Strengths*

Qualitative research methodologies are highly regarded for their capacity to delve into the complexities of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2013). This approach typically involves gathering data through direct engagement with participants, including methods like interviews, personal interactions, and observations (Locke, 2011; Wong, 2014). Such techniques enable researchers to maintain adaptability in eliciting detailed narratives from participants. A key advantage of qualitative research lies in its ability to unearth profound insights into issues that are not easily quantifiable, such as those in education, by leveraging the rich, lived experiences of individuals to enhance the breadth of the study (Hossain, 2008). Additionally, the use of open-ended questions in data collection is instrumental, allowing researchers the flexibility to steer and refine the conversation based on emerging insights during the interview process (Creswell, 2005). This adaptability is crucial, as it permits the research framework and trajectory to evolve in real-time, ensuring the incorporation of new discoveries into the study's findings.

*Weaknesses*

While qualitative research offers numerous advantages, it's important to recognize its inherent limitations. One of the challenges in employing a qualitative methodology is the development of a precise research design, as the structure of the study often emerges during the

research process itself (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Furthermore, Kozleski (2017) points out that the process of data analysis in qualitative research can be particularly demanding due to the voluminous data collected. Another significant hurdle is the potential for researcher bias, as the interpretation of data heavily relies on the researcher's perspective (Hossain, 2008; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002). Additionally, in qualitative research, the results do not undergo evaluation for statistical significance because the data are based on narratives, which may affect the perceived accuracy of the findings compared to those obtained through quantitative methods (Atieno, 2009). These limitations can lead to skepticism towards qualitative research within certain circles, particularly among those who prioritize quantitative approaches. As a result, the generalizability of qualitative findings to broader populations cannot be assumed with the same level of confidence as that of quantitative research (Atieno, 2009).

*Assumptions*

Creswell (2013) delineates four foundational philosophical assumptions underpinning qualitative research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. Ontologically, qualitative researchers recognize and articulate the existence of varied realities as perceived by different participants, emphasizing the diversity of experiences within the research context (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Epistemologically, the approach involves gathering data directly from participants within their natural environments, aiming to understand their viewpoints through their direct experiences (Bidwell & Browning, 2006; Creswell, 2013). The axiological stance involves researchers transparently conveying their own biases and the influence of their personal experiences on the data collection process (Creswell, 2018). Methodologically, the focus is on the research process and procedures, enabling researchers to

adapt their inquiries based on participant interactions and feedback during data collection (Grossoehme, 2014).

In this investigation, the researcher was committed to recognizing and integrating the varied perspectives of participants, forming themes that reflect their authentic experiences. The researcher also disclosed her own biases stemming from her roles in education and diversity, acknowledging how these perspectives influenced her analysis of the interviews and data interpretation. Open-ended interview questions were utilized, with prepared follow-up inquiries to delve deeper into participant responses when needed.

**Methodology**

Creswell (2018) identifies five distinct approaches within qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Considering the intricate challenges associated with change management in the educational sector and its historical shortcomings in achieving meaningful systemic change (Fullan, 2016), this research opted for a phenomenological qualitative approach. Phenomenology focuses on exploring the lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon from either an individual's or a group's perspective (Lewis & Staehler, 2011). The core elements of a phenomenological study include: (a) a central phenomenon of interest, (b) a specific group who has encountered this phenomenon, (c) disclosure of the researcher's personal biases regarding the phenomenon, (d) conducting interviews with individuals from the chosen group, (e) analyzing data to understand the participants' experiences and their perceptions of these experiences, and (f) synthesizing the data to articulate the shared experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2018). By employing a phenomenological approach, the study aimed to delve into the essence of change within the realms of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEI&J), drawing insights from the nuanced

and complex experiences of leaders in this domain. This methodology is particularly effective in minimizing researcher bias through specific techniques to bracket out the researcher's own experiences (Hycner, 1985).

The phenomenological method was selected as the optimal approach for investigating the practices adopted by Black women in DEI&J roles within higher education to enhance their job performance in the aftermath of the 2020 social and political unrest, thereby improving their recruitment and retention. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher sought to comprehend the lived experiences of these DEI&J practitioners. The interviews required transcription, with significant statements being grouped into themes (Moustakas, 1994), facilitating a thematic analysis that captures the experiences of these practitioners at predominantly white institutions and the influence of these environments on their professional journeys (Creswell, 2018).

### *Structured Process of Phenomenology*

Moustakas (1994) outlined a series of steps for executing a phenomenological study, which were later concisely articulated by Creswell (2018). The initial phase involves confirming that a phenomenological method is the most fitting for the research question at hand, as Gill (2020) suggests this approach is ideal for gaining a profound comprehension of individuals' experiences with a particular phenomenon. Subsequently, the researcher delineates the phenomenon as experienced collectively by the study participants. A critical step then is to separate the study's philosophical underpinnings by setting aside the researcher's preconceptions and biases regarding the phenomenon. Following this, data is gathered from subjects who have encountered the phenomenon, with in-depth, open-ended interviews being the preferred method of data collection in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2021). The

researcher proceeds to distill themes from the data, spotlighting patterns and significant

statements that emerge repeatedly. These identified themes aim to convey the essence of the

participants' experiences to the readers. The subsequent narrative crafted by the researcher

encompasses (a) the essence of what the participants experienced, (b) the context influencing

these experiences, and (c) the participants' personal reflections on these experiences. The

culmination of this process is the articulation of the phenomenon's core essence (Creswell,

2018), encapsulating the shared experiences among the participants. The study's conclusions are

then meticulously documented and presented in a written format.

### *Appropriateness of Phenomenology*

The primary objective of this study is to uncover the challenges and effective strategies

Black women DEI&J practitioners utilize to attain leadership positions in higher education. After

evaluating five qualitative methodologies, the study found the phenomenological method to be

the most fitting. Creswell (2013) articulates that qualitative inquiries originate from a

researcher's direct encounters and a deep interest in a subject, fueled by opportunities for

physical or mental engagement with participants and their surroundings. Creswell and Creswell

(2018) further elucidate that phenomenological research is adept at exploring and understanding

the shared experiences and core essence of a group's experience with a particular phenomenon.

Despite its suitability, the phenomenological approach presents specific hurdles: (a) it demands

the researcher to discern and articulate the broad philosophical underpinnings of

phenomenology, often obscure in textual analysis; (b) the selection of participants who have

firsthand experience of the phenomenon under study; and (c) the difficulty in mitigating

researcher bias, as there's a risk of subconsciously embedding personal interpretations in the

analysis (Creswell, 2018; van Manen, 1990). The essence of phenomenology lies in its ability to

"transform lived experiences into a distilled description, fostering deep reflection and analysis" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 24). This capacity underlines the decision to adopt a phenomenological stance for this investigation. As noted by Austin and Sutton (2014) employing open-ended interviews enabled the researcher to capture and articulate the lived experiences, effective strategies, and obstacles Black women DEI&J practitioners faced in navigating their professional landscapes amidst the tumultuous backdrop of 2020.

Delving into the depth of these experiences is paramount for comprehending both the nature and the nuances of what these professionals endure and navigate through (Moustakas, 1994). It's essential for equipping them with the necessary competencies to thrive within higher education settings, enhancing their professional achievements, minimizing their risk of encountering Black fatigue, and providing educational institutions with insights on optimizing work environments to effectively attract, hire, and maintain these skilled individuals.

**Research Design**

This study was a qualitative phenomenological study. The approaches to best practices and strategies to overcome challenges that Black women diversity practitioners face as they navigate effectively performing in their roles were investigated and understood using this style of research design. Additionally, an open-ended interview approach was used to extract qualitative information from participants who were chosen for their ability to speak directly to experiences on the topic of this study intended to address. The findings of this study were categorized into themes commonly spoken on by participants to define and provide deeper understanding of these experiences holistically to achieve the objectives of the study. With the approaches taken to the research design of this qualitative study, participants were observed through a phenomenological

lens (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The section to follow will provide deeper insight into design

techniques (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

**Participants and Sampling**

*Unit of Analysis*

Creswell and Clark (2011) emphasize the significance of choosing participants who

possess deep knowledge and firsthand experience of the subject matter being investigated.

Consequently, the focal point of analysis in this study was a Black woman who is an expert in

diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, and who has occupied or previously occupied a

leadership role at a tertiary education institution within the past five years.

*Population*

Grossoehme (2014) advocates for the collection of rich, detailed accounts from those

who have directly encountered the phenomenon under study to accurately depict and understand

the essence of the experience. As such, this research focuses on individuals who have navigated

the complex dynamics of diversity-related exhaustion, particularly intensified by the societal

upheavals and political discord of 2020. This study's demographic encompasses Black women

DEI&J professionals who have served in leadership capacities within both public and private

higher education settings, including community colleges, throughout the United States. By

adopting a wide-ranging approach to participant selection, the study aims to avoid restricting the

investigation to DEI&J practitioners of a single gender or practice area, acknowledging the

variance in titles and roles among those dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and

social justice. For the purposes of this investigation, a "diversity" practitioner is defined as

anyone in a role specifically committed to the promotion of diversity, equity, social justice, and

inclusion, including but not limited to, the education on these themes, the recruitment of diverse staff, and the formulation of diversity strategies.

*Sample Size*

Grossoehme (2014) highlights the importance of maintaining a concise sample size in phenomenological research to aptly capture the essence of the studied phenomenon. A smaller cohort allows for a more intimate engagement with each participant, facilitating the gathering of rich, detailed insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Nonetheless, the optimal number of participants for such studies is a topic of ongoing discussion among academics. Creswell and Creswell (2018), along with Duke (1984), recommend a sample size of three to ten participants to thoroughly investigate the phenomenon across all subjects. Other experts, like Morse (2000) and Polkinghorne (1989), argue for a range of five to ten participants, emphasizing the advantage of having ample data from each individual. Alase (2017) broadens this range to two to 25 participants, whereas Guetterman (2015) after reviewing 11 phenomenological studies in the field of education, proposes eight to 31 participants as ideal, noting an average sample size of 15 at a single site. Despite these varied perspectives, there's a consensus towards favoring a smaller group size to prevent data overload and enable a deeper individual analysis (Creswell, 2008; Guetterman, 2015; Morse, 1994). In light of these recommendations, this study settled on a sample size of 15 participants, aiming for a comprehensive saturation in the coding and analysis phases, aligning with the synthesized guidance from the literature.

*Purposive Sampling*

Securing detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences can be significantly improved through purposeful sampling (Grossoehme, 2014). This approach is deliberate in selecting individuals who possess substantial knowledge and firsthand experiences related to the

research focus (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2010). Creswell (2018) details that this method involves the researcher's strategic choice of participants and locations that can provide insightful contributions to the understanding of the research question and the core phenomenon under investigation. Essential criteria for participant selection include their (a) willingness to engage in the research process, and (b) capability to introspectively share their experiences. In this study, purposive sampling was utilized as it aligns with established criteria in literature for defining the inclusion and exclusion parameters necessary to identify Black women DEI&J practitioners in academia. As such, Black women in leadership roles within the realm of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice at tertiary education institutions were purposefully chosen.

*Participant Selection*

In order to pinpoint and recruit participants fitting the study's requirements, the researcher implemented a structured screening methodology. This involved (a) compiling an initial roster of individuals who satisfied the study criteria, (b) establishing specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to refine the pool of eligible participants, and (c) applying a strategy for maximum variation to ensure a diverse range of perspectives.

*Sampling Frame*

Pajo (2022) describes a master list of the population recruited for a study as a sampling frame. This list is critical to this research to ensure that the research questions will be addressed properly by the participants (Creswell, 2017). For this study, a master list was established through the utilization of the professional networking platform, LinkedIn, as well as recruiting the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) professional organization, which is an organization for diversity professionals and institutions who lead

national conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion in postsecondary education, where members may be invited to be study participants.

To begin the process of crafting a master list, LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com) was utilized to create a post requesting members within the researchers  network to introduce her to Black women, diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice practitioners experienced with successfully holding executive level positions in higher education who fit the criteria for inclusion via direct message. Two of the researcher's network members on LinkedIn were known and put into the sampling frame of participants who fit the criteria for inclusion. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), it is vital to obtain authorizations from leaders with access to potential participant information, prior to the study being fully conducted, which pushed the researcher to reach out to organizational committee members of the NADOHE. Furthermore, the researcher reviewed the NADOHE website and located contact information of organizational and chapter leaders. After gathering this information, the researcher contacted the organizational committee leaders via phone call and e-mail to formally request the contact information of the organization's members who matched the criteria for inclusion, as well as best practices on how to contact the members provided. After three days since first contact, a follow up phone call was placed, and another e-mail was sent to the potential participant with details of the research study being conducted if they had yet to respond.

The researcher did not receive a response from the NADOHE organization and decided to continue to reach out to practitioners via LinkedIn. When the researcher received enough responses to reach saturation from LinkedIn members willing to participate in the study, a master list was created with their contact information and their current role as a diversity professional in higher education. Afterwards, the criteria for inclusion was compared against the interested

participants and individuals who matched the criteria required for a successful research study were selected. To complete the creation of the sampling frame, a comprehensive list of 15-20 participants was finalized with participant names and contact information to schedule interviews. An IRB approved introductory e-mail script was then sent to each potential participant which introduced the research, provided an informed consent form and an official request for their participation in the study.

*Criteria for Inclusion*

To refine the initial list of potential participants, the researcher applied specific inclusion criteria to further narrow down the pool of candidates. The requirements for participants in this study were as follows: (a) they must be recognized as an expert in their field with a minimum of three years dedicated to DEI&J efforts within a higher education setting; (b) they should hold at least a graduate-level degree in education or a related field; (c) they must identify as a Black woman; (d) they must be either currently employed at or have left a position at a higher education institution in the United States within the last two years.

*Criteria for Exclusion*

Individuals were deemed ineligible for participation in this study based on the following exclusion criteria: (a) unwillingness to consent to audio or video recording of the interview; (b) employment outside of an accredited university; (c) absence of a photograph on their LinkedIn profile; (d) unavailability for either an in-person or virtual meeting during the months of January to March 2023 for an interview lasting 60 minutes; (e) reluctance to sign the informed consent document.

*Criteria for Maximum Variation*

In the process of participant selection for this research, the final decision was guided by a method known as maximum variation sampling. Creswell (2018) describes this technique as a preferred method in qualitative research, where the researcher establishes specific criteria that distinguish the participants beforehand, then "selects individuals who significantly differ based on those criteria" (p. 158). To ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives, the researcher considered factors such as the participants' roles, educational achievements, and locations. Specifically, the selection was aimed at including participants from (a) a range of both public and private higher education institutions catering to diverse student populations, and (b) various age groups to capture a wide array of experiences in diversity work. Through a meticulous application of inclusion, exclusion, and maximum variation principles, the researcher compiled a comprehensive list of 15 potential participants for the study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Every university operates with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to oversee that research practices do not breach federal regulations, safeguarding human subjects from potential harm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It's crucial for research endeavors to thoroughly consider their ethical implications, ensuring that the conduct of the study is as ethical as possible. This includes (a) maintaining participant confidentiality, (b) minimizing any risk by actively caring for their well-being, and (c) ensuring equitable and respectful treatment of all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In alignment with the ethical standards set by Pepperdine University's IRB, this study adhered to strict guidelines requiring informed consent from all human participants. To address ethical considerations and protect the participants, several preparatory steps were undertaken.

Initially, an IRB approval request, as detailed in Appendix A, was submitted for the proposed

study to undergo review and receive the necessary authorization from Pepperdine University's

IRB. This application detailed the study's design, methodologies, and ethical safeguards,

including the principal investigator's certification in research ethics and compliance, evidenced

by completion of the CITI program. Additionally, the submission included the Informed Consent

form (see Appendix B), which explicitly outlined the measures taken to protect participants'

rights and well-being, which included the following:

- The research's voluntary nature and the right to withdraw consent at any time.

- An overview of the research purpose, the expected duration of participation, and the

  procedures involved.

- Any potential risks or discomforts that might arise from participation.

- The potential benefits of the research to participants or to others, which could be

  reasonably anticipated.

- Any viable alternative procedures or treatments that could benefit the participant.

Following IRB approval, participant recruitment began with the use of a recruitment script, (see

Appendix C; Appendix D), which outlined the study's potential risks and benefits, along with the

research procedures. This communication reiterated that participation was entirely voluntary,

confidentiality would be maintained, and opting out would bear no adverse consequences. Before

commencing each interview, participants provided a signed copy of the Informed Consent form,

ensuring they understood and agreed to the study's terms.

To ensure the privacy and security of the participants, interviews were conducted via

Zoom from confidential locations, such as the researchers' home or office environments

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interview recordings were securely stored on computers that were

safeguarded with passwords. To maintain anonymity throughout the research process, participants' identifiable information was obscured using pseudonyms instead of real names and the names of their institutions. Each participant was designated an alphabetical identifier, ranging from A to O. Following the transcription of the interviews, the original recordings were promptly destroyed to protect any personal identifiable information they contained. Non-identifiable data, including the transcriptions and other relevant materials, were stored in a secure location and scheduled for destruction three years post-study. Importantly, the study did not provide any external incentives to participants. Instead, the opportunity to contribute their insights and experiences served as a benefit, offering value to the broader DEI&J field and supporting the network of Black women professionals within it.

**Data Collection**

For this study, data collection was executed through semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions, facilitating an environment where participants could candidly express their views and experiences (Creswell, 2008). The initial contact with potential participants was made via email, utilizing the IRB-approved recruitment notice detailed in Appendix C. Interested individuals received follow-up emails containing the IRB-approved consent form (found in Appendix A) and the interview questions (see Appendix E). Agreement to participate, signified by signing the informed consent form, entailed a commitment to a one-hour recorded interview session. These interviews were arranged according to the participant's preference, either in-person at their workplace or through Zoom Video Conferencing (https://zoom.us), with consent forms collected either electronically or physically prior to the interview. During each session, the researcher employed two recording devices for redundancy and maintained a hard copy of the interview guide to facilitate notetaking and reflections. By the conclusion of this process, 15

higher education DEI&J practitioners had been interviewed. Subsequently, the researcher meticulously transcribed the audio recordings to written format for analysis. The strategic choice of semi-structured, open-ended interviews was instrumental in capturing a rich, in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

**Interview Techniques**

In exploring interview methodologies for qualitative research, the investigator evaluated three distinct approaches as outlined by Patton (2010): informal or unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews. Unstructured interviews, akin to guided conversations focused on the researcher's areas of interest (Brinkmann, 2014), pose challenges in response comparison and analysis (Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews, featuring pre-set, open-ended questions, permit interviewer and interviewee flexibility, fostering rich, detailed responses that illuminate the participants' experiences (Hill et al., 2020), while maintaining focus on the research objectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Conversely, structured interviews, characterized by uniformity and closed questions, may not effectively elicit the depth of participants' experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Given the goal to delve deeply into the experiences and strategies of Black women DEI&J practitioners in higher education, particularly in the context of the post-2020 socio-political climate, the researcher opted for semi-structured, in-person interviews. This format was chosen for its ability to capture complex, nuanced insights into effective practices and the challenges faced by these practitioners in environments that have historically been exclusionary. To facilitate this process, participants were sent a reminder email one week prior to their interview, confirming the date and time, and providing another copy of the interview questions to prepare them for the discussion.

Arriving 20 minutes early to the interview venue, the researcher was prepared with two recorders, a clipboard bearing the interview questions, and a pen. To establish a connection and show appreciation, she introduced herself at the start of each interview, thanking the participants for their contribution to the research. Following the advice of Leech (2002), she struck a balance between demonstrating her knowledge and maintaining humility, ensuring not to overshadow the interviewee's expertise. As they took their seats, casual conversation about their day was initiated to ease into the formal interview setting. The researcher then collected the signed informed consent forms, briefly revisiting its key points, especially noting the audio recording aspect of the interview. She emphasized the semi-structured nature of the interview, highlighting the possibility of probing questions for deeper insights beyond the provided questionnaire. The interview commenced only after ensuring there were no outstanding questions, with the reassurance that participation could be discontinued at any moment.

The thorough literature review conducted beforehand equipped the researcher to engage meaningfully with the participants' inquiries and to identify emerging themes throughout the discussions. Emphasizing active listening, she echoed the respondents' words to affirm understanding and engagement with their narratives (Adams, 2015). Moreover, adhering to Adams' (2015) guidance, she maintained a neutral stance during the interviews, avoiding any debates or disagreements with the participants to ensure a space where they felt heard and respected. Lastly, the researcher ensured to allow for the interviewees to finish their responses before asking any follow-up or clarifying questions, such as:

- "Why do you think that is the case...?"
- "Do you have specific examples of...?"
- "What would you use that for...?"

Upon completion of the predetermined interview and follow-up questions, the researcher inquired if the interviewees had any additional thoughts or questions regarding the study. After addressing any inquiries, the researcher informed the participants that they were welcome to reach out with further questions in the future. To formally end each interview, she expressed gratitude to the participants for their contribution of time. This portion of the document outlines the interview methodologies employed in the study, which received initial approval from the preliminary review committee and was subsequently endorsed and finalized by the dissertation committee. Given that the interview protocol was intended for a singular application, conventional methods for verifying the reliability of the data collection process were deemed inapplicable.

**Interview Protocol**

In phenomenological research, the primary method of gathering data typically involves conducting interviews with individuals who have firsthand experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2018). Following the guidance of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), it is advised to create an interview protocol or guide, featuring a series of open-ended questions that steer the conversation. For the current study, the researcher formulated a set of 12 interview questions, drawing insights from an extensive review of literature concerning the experiences of Black women DEI&J practitioners in academia. These questions were meticulously crafted to ensure they were both comprehensive and distinct, covering the breadth of the topic without overlap.

*Interview Questions*

The following includes research questions (RQ) with the corresponding interview questions:

**RQ1.** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education?

- Interview Question 1: What unique challenges do you face as a Black woman working in an executive-level position at a higher education institution?

- Interview Question 2: How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your professional success?

- Interview Question 3: How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception of the mission of your institution?

- Interview Question 4: How do these challenges impact your health and well-being?

**RQ2.** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome these challenges at higher education institutions?

- Interview Question 5: What strategies do you use at your job to overcome challenges as a Black woman?

- Interview Question 6: What does your institution or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges?

**RQ3.** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners who work at higher education institutions define, track and measure their success?

- Interview Question 7: How would you define success for Black women

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners in higher education institutions?

- Interview Question 8: How do you track and measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

- Interview Question 9: Reflecting back on your time at a higher education institution, how would you measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner? (if resigned from field)

**RQ4.** Based on their experiences, what recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field?

- Interview Question 10: What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve your definition of success?

- Interview Question 11: What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners who are struggling to navigate resigning or powering through racialized or gendered aggressions in this line of work?

- Interview Question 12: What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners achieve your definition of success?

**Relationship Between Research and Interview Questions**

Table 2 outlines how each research question aligns with the respective interview questions. As noted earlier, the formation of the interview questions was guided by an extensive

literature review, the researcher's personal insights, and a rigorous three-step procedure to confirm their validity, details of which will be elaborated on in later sections. Additionally, the researcher crafted each question deliberately to capture a comprehensive insight into the shared experiences of participants who have directly encountered the phenomenon being researched.

**Validity of the Study**. Creswell (2018) articulates that in qualitative research, validation serves to evaluate the "accuracy of the findings as accurately represented by the researcher, the participants, and the audience" (p. 259). Additionally, it's imperative to verify the validity of the instruments used, such as interview questions, to confirm they effectively capture the constructs being investigated in the research questions. In this investigation, the researcher ensured the validity of the interview protocol and its alignment with the research questions via a comprehensive three-phase approach: assessing face validity, conducting peer reviews for validity, and obtaining validity feedback from subject matter experts.

*Prima-Facie and Content Validity*. "Prima facie," a term derived from Latin, means "at first glance" (Herlitz, 1994, p. 392) and is frequently employed in legal contexts to denote a case that possesses sufficient evidence to warrant its preliminary acceptance as true (Herlitz, 1994). The dissertation committee reviewed and endorsed the four research questions proposed by the researcher, affirming the instrument's face validity—its apparent effectiveness in measuring the intended phenomenon. Following this validation, the researcher conducted an exhaustive literature review on the role of diversity practitioners within higher education, detailed in Chapter 2. This foundational work informed the crafting of 12 interview questions designed to elicit detailed answers pertinent to each research question. The alignment of each interview question with a specific research question ensured the instrument's face validity (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | **IQ1:** What unique challenges do you face as a Black woman working in an executive-level position at a higher education institution?<br>**IQ2:** How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your professional success?<br>**IQ3:** How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception of the mission of your institution?<br>**IQ4:** How do these challenges impact your health and well-being? |
| **RQ2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome these challenges at higher education institutions? | **IQ5:** What strategies do you use at your job to overcome challenges as a Black woman?<br>**IQ6:** What does your institution or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges? |
| **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners who work at higher education institutions define, track and measure their success? | **IQ7:** How would you define success for Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners in higher education institutions?<br>**IQ8:** How do you track and measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?<br>**IQ9:** Reflecting back on your time at a higher education institution, how would you measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner? (if resigned from field) |

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ4:** Based on their experiences, what recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? | **IQ10:** What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve your definition of success? **IQ11:** What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners who are struggling to navigate resigning or powering through racialized or gendered aggressions in this line of work? **IQ12:** What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners achieve your definition of success? |

*Note.* The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions as developed by the researcher.

**Peer-Review Validity**

According to Creswell (2007), peer-reviewing allows the researchers' study process to be examined and critiqued by an external source. The purpose of peer-review is to receive feedback to confirm validity and the significance of the questions being asked to an interviewee. After the interview questions for this study were created, the validity of the questions were reviewed by three Pepperdine doctoral cohort members with experience in research and design to confirm each interview question properly aligned with the corresponding research question. Each doctoral student was asked if they would participate in the peer-review process (see Appendix F). If they agreed to participate, they were provided with a link to a Google form where they could find the research and interview questions. As the peer-reviewers read the questions under review, they were asked within the form to mark the following answers in correspondence: (a)

keep the interview question as stated, (b) delete the question or (c) provide a suggestion of how the question could be modified to remain as an interview question and better support the research question. Lastly, the peer-reviews were asked to provide any recommended interview questions they believed were necessary to the interview process. Table 3 shows the peer-reviewed research questions and corresponding interview questions.

**Table 3**

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions (Revised)*

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | **IQ1:** What unique challenges do you face as a Black woman working in an executive-level position at a higher education institution?<br>**IQ2:** How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your professional success?<br>**IQ3:** How do these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception of the mission of your institution?<br>**IQ4:** Do you know what the mission of your institution is? Is there a specific one for diversity and if so, do you feel a sense of alignment with either of these missions?<br>**IQ5:** How do these challenges impact your health and well-being? |
| **RQ2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? | **IQ6:** What strategies do you use at your job to overcome challenges as a Black woman?<br>**IQ7:** What does your institution or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges? |

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? | **IQ8:** How would you define success for Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners in higher education institutions?<br>**IQ9:** How do you track and measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?<br>**IQ10:** Reflecting back on your time at a higher education institution, how would you measure your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner? (if resigned from field)<br>**IQ11:** What does perceived success in others look like for you in your role? |
| **RQ4:** What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? | **IQ12:** What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve your definition of success?<br>**IQ13:** What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners who are struggling to navigate resigning or powering through racialized or gendered aggressions in this line of work?<br>**IQ14:** What recommendations would you give to higher education institutions to ensure Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners achieve your definition of success? |

*Note.* The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions with revisions based on feedback from peer-reviewers. Subsequent changes were made to the order and phrasing of questions within the interview protocol.

**Expert Review Validity**

   To complete the validity review process of the interview questions for this study, the researcher needed an expert review. This process requires an outside authority to audit the proposed interviewed questions to determine their relevance to the study being conducted. The research used her dissertation committee to conduct this expert review and used their feedback to establish credibility of the interview questions. Table 4 shows the research and interview questions presented during the expert review and any changes that were deemed necessary by the committee and became the questions that were used during the interview process.

**Table 4**

*Expert Reviewed Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | Icebreaker: Tell me a little bit about your career. <br> **IQ1:** Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore". Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected. <br> **IQ4:** Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you. <br>  ● Follow-Up: What were those challenges? <br> **IQ7:** What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J practitioner? |
| **RQ2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? | **IQ2:** How did you deal with this challenge? <br> **IQ3:** What did you learn? <br> **IQ5:** How did you deal with this challenge? <br> **IQ6:** What did you learn? <br> **IQ8:** How did you deal with this challenge? |

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| | **IQ9:** What did you learn? |
| **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? | **IQ10:** How would you define success for you as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions? <br> **IQ11:** How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions? |
| **RQ4:** What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? | **IQ12:** If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be? <br> **IQ13:** What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve success? |

*Note*. The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions with revisions based on feedback from the expert reviewers (committee). Subsequent changes were made to the order and phrasing of questions within the interview protocol.

**Reliability of the Study**

The credibility of a study hinges on its reliability, which is measured by the consistency of its findings across repeated experiments or the stability of its outcomes over time (Richards & Morse, 2012). To ascertain the validity of the research tools – including both the overarching research questions and the specific interview questions – a preliminary interview was conducted with an individual who matched the study's participant criteria. This step was critical for evaluating the research instrument's reliability. During this pilot phase, the interviewee was invited to provide feedback, ensuring the clarity and comprehensibility of each question, thereby reinforcing the study's reliability and uniformity. Following this initial interview, the researcher

incorporated the feedback to minimize potential biases, adjust the phrasing of questions, and enhance the overall data collection process (Belotto, 2018).

*Pilot Study*

In addition to the structure mentioned above, the researcher found two test experts who met the criteria for inclusion and agreed to participate in the study. According to Creswell and Poth (2016) the feedback and comments of the pilot interview can be a resource used by the researcher to assess any biases, edit questions, and change any data collection procedures as needed. Once their interviews were concluded they were asked to provide feedback on the interview questions to ensure that the instruments being used for data collection were consistent and reliable. Conducting a pilot interview allowed the researcher to establish the instrument's reliability.

**Statement of Personal Bias**

For a phenomenological study to deeply capture the essence of participants' experiences, it is crucial for the researcher to temporarily suspend any prior assumptions or knowledge about the subject matter (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher's own background in diversity, education, and program innovation has naturally influenced her viewpoint on effective strategies for overcoming obstacles within educational settings. Thus, acknowledging the potential impact of her experiences on the research approach, it became imperative to consciously bracket out personal biases in order to maintain objectivity and integrity in the study.

**Bracketing and Epoche**

Creswell (2018) explains that bracketing, or epoche, is when a researcher brackets themselves out of the study by acknowledging their existing personal biases or experiences with the phenomenon. By removing themselves from the study, bracketing may help the researcher

remain focused solely on the narratives of study participants. The researcher used multiple

bracketing approaches to limit personal bias in this study. One technique included the use of a

bracketing journal to list all preconceived notions on Black women DEI&J practitioners in

higher education, prior to interviewing participants. Throughout the research process, the

researcher continued to write in her bracketing journal to reflect on her observations,

assumptions and thoughts. Additionally, during the data collection process, the researcher

engaged with outside sources to remove further biases.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that researchers could use the data analysis-spiral

approach to analyze research data. For a researcher to utilize this approach, the following steps

must be taken: (a) organize and manage the data, (b) review and notetake emerging ideas, (c)

define codes into themes, (d) develop and assess interpretations, (e) represent the data using

visualizations, and (f) summarize the findings. For the purpose of this study, the researcher

organized the data by electronically transcribing the recorded interviews and storing them in a

secure online database. For a qualitative study, coding begins when the collected data is

separated into smaller texts (Cresswell, 2018). During this process, the data will be analyzed,

placed into these smaller texts into assigned themes or phrases. For this study, the researcher

transcribed the conducted interviews with a professional transcription software that was

downloaded to the researcher's computer to maintain privacy. After this, each recording

transcription was saved under a pseudonym such as, Participant A, to ensure that confidentiality

was maintained. Following the actual interviews, each transcription was analyzed to explore

themes and concepts in the following areas:

*Interrater Reliability and Validity*

The researcher used a multi-step approach to ensuring the reliability of the study. Creswell (2003) states that the researcher can enhance reliability by using multiple coders to analyze the data. The researcher selected two doctoral students with qualitative research experience and familiarity with the theoretical frameworks used in the study "co-raters" to assist in the process of ensuring validity and reliability. The researcher ensured interrater reliability and validity of the study through a five-step process:

1. Baseline Themes. Three individuals were asked to participate in interviews with the researcher. Once these interviews were conducted, the researcher was able to identify and group themes and concepts into categories for this study.

2. Interrater Review – Consensus. The researcher found two peer-review experts with Pepperdine University with prior experience in research and coding to aid in reviewing the transcriptions and themes coded by the researcher to complete the interrater review and come to consensus.

3. Baseline Themes – Remaining 12 Interviews. The remaining interview transcripts were examined, coded and provided to the peer review experts for a final review, reflection and consensus on the credibility of the themes and concepts.

4. Interrater Review – Consensus. If during the interrater review, the peer reviewers and researchers reach a consensus then no expert review was required, and the researcher could move onto the findings.

5. No Consensus > Expert Review. If during the interrater review, consensus was not met on at least 8-% of the analysis, then the dissertation committee would need to perform expert review validity. After the finalization of the codes, the research would

be able to move onto the findings which will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

## Data Presentation

For this research study, the collected data were presented with each interview question being individually aligned with participant responses. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) the results of a qualitative study should be reported following a basic procedure of developing explanations and themes from the collected data. The data collected for this study were presented through a multiplicity of layouts such as charts, tables, quotes from interviewees and narrative text. In doing this, the researcher analyzed collected data to provide an in-depth description of how participant narratives compare to previous studies and literature on the subject matter.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 delineates the methodological framework, research design, and techniques deployed to conduct a rigorous qualitative study. The researcher elucidated the study's nature, highlighting the advantages and constraints associated with employing qualitative and phenomenological methodologies for research. Furthermore, justification was provided for selecting a phenomenological design as the most fitting method to explore the effective practices and experiences of Black women DEI&J practitioners within the realm of higher education. Data collection was achieved through semi-structured interviews with individuals possessing firsthand experience of the phenomenon. The interview questions underwent a rigorous three-tier validation process, encompassing initial assessment, peer evaluation, and scrutiny by subject matter experts, to affirm their validity and reliability. The chapter wraps up by outlining the data analysis procedures, setting the stage for presenting the research outcomes in Chapter 4.

**Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

Black women have had to develop a larger vision of our society than perhaps any other group. They have had to understand white men, white women, and black men. And they have had to understand themselves. When black women win victories, it is a boost for virtually every segment of society.

— Angela Davis

**Introduction**

As Black women ascend to leadership roles within the realms of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education, they encounter various forms of racial and gender-based discrimination, including microaggressions and misogynoir (T. B. Johnson, 2021; McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2003; Moses, 1989; Winters, 2020). These adversities often lead to feelings of tokenism, fatigue, and a sense of being devalued, adversely affecting their willingness and capacity to remain in such positions (T. B. Johnson, 2021). This situation underscores a critical issue: the appointment of diversity officers without first establishing a supportive environment for change can hinder their professional, social, psychological, and physical well-being, trapping them in a dilemma—either to persist amidst discrimination or to exit the academic field or institution.

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to uncover effective practices for Black women DEI&J practitioners in higher education to manage and transcend feelings of tokenism, exhaustion, and undervaluation. The study also seeks to explore (a) the ways these practitioners navigate the complexities of higher education institutions post the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-political disturbances of 2020; (b) the tactics they employ to counteract feelings of tokenism, fatigue, and being under-appreciated while holding a cabinet-level position at these

institutions; (c) the approaches they use to define, assess, and monitor their achievements within these roles; and (d) the guidance they offer to other women on how to successfully navigate the DEI&J landscape in academia. To fulfill these objectives, research questions (RQs) were formulated in conjunction with the interview questions to pinpoint the most effective strategies to combat feelings of tokenism, exhaustion, and undervaluation, aiming to forge a blueprint for success and support in the field. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education?

- RQ2. What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges?

- RQ3. How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success?

- RQ4. What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field?

To address the research questions, 13 interview questions (IQs) were developed and refined through interrater reliability and validity. These IQs were then administered to participants who met the predetermined eligibility criteria outlined in Chapter 3. The IQs were as follows:

- Icebreaker: Tell me a little bit about your career.

- IQ1: Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore". Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected.

- IQ2: How did you deal with this challenge?

- IQ3: What did you learn?

- IQ4: Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you.
  - Follow-Up: What were those challenges?
- IQ5: How did you deal with this challenge?
- IQ6: What did you learn?
- IQ7: What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J practitioner?
- IQ8: How did you deal with this challenge?
- IQ9: What did you learn?
- IQ10: How would you define success for you as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?
- IQ11: How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?
- IQ12: If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be?
- IQ13: What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve success?

The participants shared their perspectives, emotions, and experiences through the interview questions, offering valuable insights into the strategies and practices they utilize to navigate challenges within higher education settings. The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, creating space for a more natural, conversational flow. With the participants' permission, these discussions were recorded to ensure that the qualitative data could be meticulously reviewed and analyzed later, positioning the participants' responses as the core data source for coding in this study. This chapter will delve into a detailed examination of the study's

participants, the methodologies employed in collecting data, and the processes followed for data analysis. Additionally, it will feature graphs to enhance the comprehension and visualization of the emergent themes derived from the interview data.

**Participants**

Through purposeful sampling, the researcher identified 30 prospective participants with the intent to interview 15 Black women DEI&J practitioners, or until saturation was reached. As a result, saturation was reached during this process at 13 interviews - the responses provided by the participants began to present paralleled instances, thus no longer providing additional data that would provide new insight - however, 15 interviews were conducted by the researcher to ensure complete saturation and valid data collection. All the participants met the criteria for inclusion which was (a) an expert in their field with at least 5 years of performing DEI&J work at a higher education institution, (b) have a minimum of a graduate degree in education or in their respective subject, (c) must be a Black woman, and (d) must be currently employed or have resigned with the last two years from a higher education institution in the United States.

After the participants were interviewed, the researcher transcribed each recorded interview for purposes of data collection to uncover overarching ideas and keywords that would create themes which were coded. The participants were selected through LinkedIn and included diversity practitioners who worked in consulting, higher education, or had left higher education for the private sector within the last three years. Additionally, the participants all had experiences of 5-25 years and were in cabinet–level positions, directors, or owned their own consulting firm focused on assisting institutions and private organizations in implementing diversity and social justice initiatives.

**Data Collection**

Once the researcher obtained IRB approval on April 9, 2023, participants were recruited beginning April 10, 2023, through the professional social networking platform, LinkedIn. Using the IRB approval recruitment script, the researcher sent approximately 50 potential participants an invitation to participate in the dissertation study via LinkedIn's InMail system. The researcher also pursued the connections previously made on LinkedIn via direct messaging and posts on their personal LinkedIn page with the same recruitment email asking to be connected to Black women diversity practitioners who met the eligibility requirements. A week after the first contact, three women who were sent the recruitment email via LinkedIn's InMail responded with their interest in participating; the informed consent form was then sent to these individuals to be reviewed, signed and returned to the researcher. Upon completion, the participants reserved their interview date and time using the researcher's online automated scheduling system, Calendly.

The researcher then reassessed the master list of potential participants and sent a second follow up email to initial potential participants. The follow-up email resulted in six more participants agreeing to participate in the study, signing the informed consent form and scheduling their interviews. To recruit more Black women diversity practitioners who matched the eligibility criteria, the researcher actively searched for new participants on LinkedIn, in addition to inquiring with professional connections to refer the researcher to potential participants. As a result, 15 new recruitment emails were sent, and two individuals responded with interest to participate. From the inquiry of professional connections, five professionals with connections to higher education diversity offices reached out to several others who matched the criteria for inclusion, forwarded them the researchers study purpose and contact information, which resulted in three more Black women diversity practitioners agreeing to be interviewed

between May 5 and May 30, 2023. In addition, during this time an individual from the initial 50 recruitment emails had reached out to the research agreeing to participate in the study. In total, 65 emails were sent for purposes of recruiting study participants and 15 interviews were conducted.

All the participants were provided with the informed consent form to review, sign and return, after agreeing to be interviewed. The participants were given time to time to read through the consent form, and were advised to ask any additional questions, if any, about the study prior to signing. Participants were notified that their interview would be recorded solely for data collection purposes and that all interviews, along with their identity, were kept confidential. The researcher explained to participants that the interview would last 60 minutes at most; however, interviews with participants ranged between 40-90 minutes, with the average length being approximately 55 minutes. Each interview was conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing application, to allot for scheduling flexibility and to allow the researcher to interview participants in a multiplicity of geographic locations across the United States of America. During each interview, participants were asked to be recorded and notified when the research was starting and ending the recording. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing them to be conducted in a conversational manner, ensuring the participants felt comfortable throughout the interview, and providing space for the researcher to affirm and repeat participant responses for confirmation and clarification.

Table 5 provides details about the participants, while maintaining confidentiality by leaving out identifiers such as, names, names of organization or institutions they currently or previously worked for. In addition, pseudonyms were given to participants in place of their

names and places of employment were not listed throughout the study. The title/role of the

participants, along with the date of when the interview took place are displayed below in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Details and Dates of Participant Interviews*

| Participants | Role / Title | Interview Date |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Assistant Director of Training & Diversity, Office of Postdoctoral Affairs | April 19, 2023 |
| Participant 2 | Assistant Director, Office for Access and Equity | April 22, 2023 |
| Participant 3 | Executive Diversity and Inclusion Officer | April 23, 2023 |
| Participant 4 | Executive Director for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion | April 25, 2023 |
| Participant 5 | Private Sector DEI Consultant | April 28, 2023 |
| Participant 6 | Director, Center for Inclusion and Diversity | April 28, 2023 |
| Participant 7 | Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Title IX Coordinator | April 30, 2023 |
| Participant 8 | Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion | May 1, 2023 |
| Participant 9 | Director, Student Equity & Inclusion Initiatives | May 1, 2023 |
| Participant 10 | Independent Consultant & Strategist | May 2, 2023 |

| Participants | Role / Title | Interview Date |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 11 | Director for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion | May 4, 2023 |
| Participant 12 | Consulting Firm Partner | May 11, 2023 |
| Participant 13 | Executive Director of the TEAM Center | May 12, 2023 |
| Participant 14 | Associate Professor of Higher Education; Equity and Inclusion Consultant | May 25, 2023 |
| Participant 15 | Chief Diversity Officer | May 30, 2023 |

**Data Analysis**

Participant responses to the interview queries were meticulously analyzed and served as the foundational data for this investigation. The researcher was diligent in setting aside personal biases to ensure neutrality and objectivity throughout the data gathering phase. The focus remained strictly on the insights shared by the participants, aiming for a fair synthesis of overarching themes without presuppositions influencing the outcomes. The process involved recording the interviews on a secure, password-protected computer via Zoom, with transcriptions carried out using Otter.ai, a transcription tool featuring robust security measures to guarantee exclusive access by the researcher.

Post-interview, the audio recordings were promptly transcribed, converting them into text within 15-20 minutes, and then downloaded as Microsoft Word documents for thorough examination. The researcher engaged in a rigorous review cycle, going over each transcription three times to confirm the precision of the captured data. During this review, analytical notes were made directly on the Word documents, highlighting significant keywords, phrases, and

emerging themes for further exploration. This meticulous organization of data, categorized by participant responses, facilitated the identification of common patterns across the board. Subsequently, these initial codes were refined into distinct groups, encapsulating the recurrent themes drawn from the participants' narratives, thereby enabling a comprehensive thematic analysis grounded in the lived experiences conveyed during the interviews.

**Inter-Rater Review Process**

After finalizing the coding for the initial trio of interviews, the researcher engaged in a peer review session with three doctoral students from the Doctor of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy program at Pepperdine University, all of whom were well-versed in qualitative research and phenomenological study analysis. The researcher shared an Excel sheet with the coded data from these interviews, alongside the interview questions and transcripts, for the doctoral candidates' scrutiny. The panel reviewed this material and offered their insights on the coding approach for the researcher's consideration. Subsequently, the researcher convened with the panel via Zoom to deliberate on their suggestions. This collaborative review led to a unified agreement on the initial themes and codes identified by the researcher.

Following this collaborative review, the researcher proceeded with the next 12 interviews, which were then transcribed, coded, and once more subjected to the peer review panel for examination of the transcriptions, questions, and coding in the Excel sheet to confirm precision and offer further insights. Another Zoom meeting was arranged to discuss the panel's latest feedback, facilitating a comprehensive dialogue on the data and analysis to reach another consensus. The peer reviewers suggested adjustments such as renaming themes for clarity or brevity, from broader descriptors like "DEI Approaches Differ by Institutions" to more succinct

titles like "Differing Approaches," or enhancing a theme with an additional phrase. This iterative

inter-rater review process was meticulously applied to each interview (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Inter-Rater Coding Table Edit Recommendations*

| Inter-Rater (3) | Interview Question | Theme | Inter-Rater Recommendation | Applied Modification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inter-Rater 1 | IQ1 | Theme 2: Dismissive of Expertise | Replace "Dismissive of Expertise" to "Dismissive" per participants responses using this theme to encompass experience and expertise being dismissed | Yes. Replaced "Dismissive of Expertise" to "Dismissive" |
| Inter-Rater 2 | IQ3 | Theme 14: Network of DEI and WOC Practitioners | Replace "Network of DEI and WOC Practitioners" to "Network" | Yes. Replaced "Network of DEI and WOC Practitioners" to "Network" |
| Inter-Rater 3 | IQ1 | Theme 1: Institutional Pushback, Superficial Support and Lip Service | Replace Theme 1 from "Superficial support" to solely "Superficial Support" since it is the code name that seems to encompass the others | Yes. Replaced with "Superficial Support" |
| Inter-Rater 3 | IQ2 | Theme 4: Self-Advocacy | Replace Theme 2 with "Asserting Oneself" | Yes. Replaced "Self-Advocacy" with "Asserting Oneself" |

*Note*. Recommendations from inter-rater review panel and modifications applied.

**Data Display**

The data from this study was organized according to the research questions and the subsequent interview questions. The mutual themes were identified through grouping phrases, keywords and responses. All the data was then summarized, and frequency bar charts were created to provide a visual illustration of the results. Each chart was organized by the frequency of the answers provided by the participants. Additionally, a description of the theme, along with direct quotes from the participants were provided. The participants were only identified as Participant A, Participant B, and so on to Participant O. Identifying this way allowed the researcher to maintain the confidentiality of each participant.

*Research Question 1*

The first research question (RQ1) asked, What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? Interviewees were asked a total of three interview questions (IQ) related to RQ1, which are as follows:

- IQ1: Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore." Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected.

- IQ4: Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you.

- IQ7: What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J practitioner?

The responses from the participants were analyzed and recurring themes along with parallels were identified. The answers were grouped as themes and coded as the overall responses for RQ1.

**Interview Question 1.** IQ1 asked, "Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore." Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected. After a total of 15 responses, three themes emerged (a) superficial support, (b) dismissive actions and (c) burnout. The themes are discussed in further detail. Figure 1 depicts the visual bar graph which shows the count of responses per each theme. Participants provided multiple answers to the question which the frequency bar chart displays regarding the number of responses for each theme.

**Figure 1**

*Interview Question 1: Coding Results*
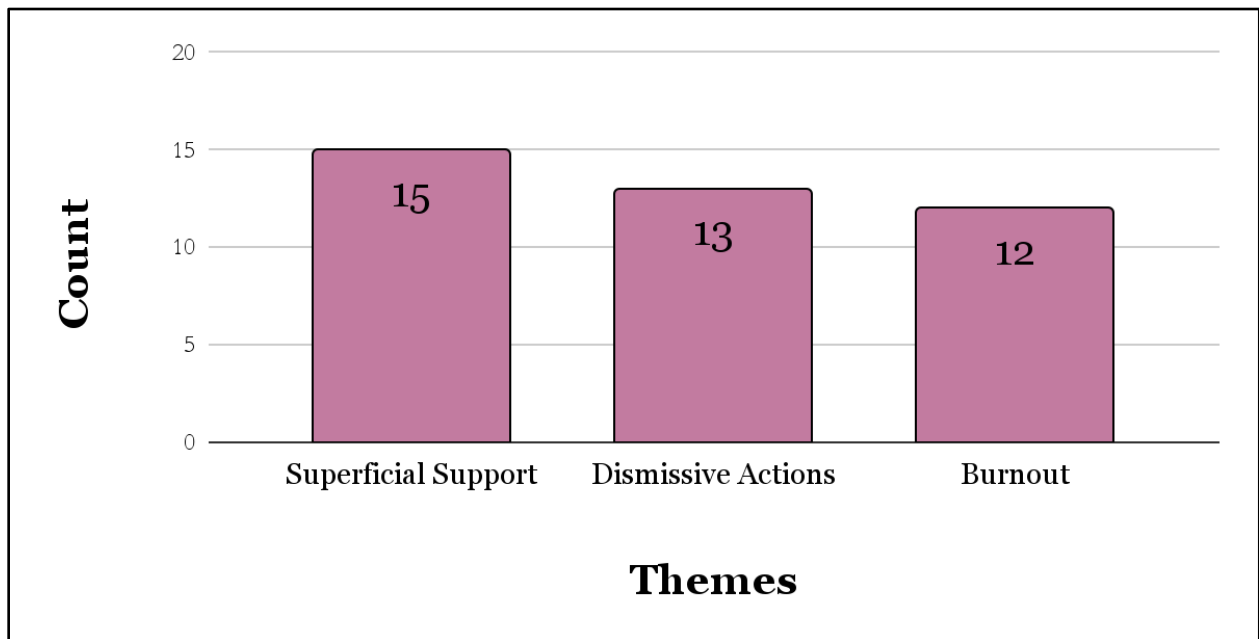


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 1 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

**Superficial Support.** The theme, superficial support, was the most common topic that emerged as one of the main ways they reflected upon their experiences in higher education

institutions as diversity professionals and the effect their experiences had on them physically and emotionally. Keywords and phrases in relation to superficial support were shown in 15 of the 15 responses (100%), such as *being condescending, lip service, limited staffing, shoulder all responsibility, budget restraints, institutional resistance, and lack of meaningful action, lack of awareness*. Participant 2 stated: "And it's hard to be in this position trying to do the work when institutions are not serious about doing the work." Participant 7 stated:

I think there's a lot of lip service... it's usually from well-meaning white people that don't even understand. So, I have become, I think, more resolute as I've gotten older, like, I don't care what, you know, the lip service that white men are gonna give me or that well, meaning liberal, they're giving me like, it's not about them at the end of the day. And so, I'm gonna press forward to get what I need to get from my people and communities that share similar experiences, you know, like, in spite of them, like they can come on this journey with us or not. And hopefully, they will; there's a lot of great allies, and people who don't share the same lived experiences and characteristics by half the work, who are amazing allies, and fully supportive

Participant 8 illustrated further:

People think that as soon as there is a DEI person or office that knows that those DEI individuals are responsible for fixing everything and that no one else should be sharing the work. And nine times out of 10 the majority of diversity offices, or departments probably have six to seven staff members, where sometimes if you look at admissions, or residence life, or at athletics, there's typically a full football team of folks there to work.

In addition, Participant 14 stated: "So just feeling as though the two institutions that I've either been at or that I'm currently at, or having colleagues that are doing this work and feeling as

though you're hired to do a job, but then when you're truly looking to execute the job, either there's a lack of understanding and knowledge or there's pushback to whatever recommendations it is that you're looking to do."

***Dismissive Actions***. Another common theme identified by the participants were dismissive actions performed by institution leaders, faculty and students of their expertise and lived experiences. Thirteen of the 15 participants (87%) answered the question with this phrase. Keywords mentioned *being dismissive, condescending communication, demeaning manner, not being respected, derogatory remarks, and not being recognized or acknowledged.* Participant 3 shared, "I have literally had a supervisor talk to me about the way I walked down the hallway and I remember being like, this feels very inappropriate. I remember in my performance evaluation, bringing it up that it really bothered me that people were focused on my physical appearance and not my content." Participant 11 stated, "And so I think I'll draw on my experience to put that out there and reframe when I feel like people are explaining things to me, assuming I don't understand or that they need to impress upon me of like their own credential or learning that, you know, I am equally qualified in this space, and probably more so than you." Participant 4 shared her thoughts by explaining:

> I was tasked to start a program for the multicultural affairs department and when presenting my research he [supervisor] felt entitled to like, interrupt me and start asking his questions. I didn't have issues with them personally, you know, camaraderie. Most of the people were really nice, and I think they don't understand when they're being condescending, when they're being biased in some way, when they're discounting your expertise and experiences, and so on.

In addition, Participant 15 shared, "It was very clear to me that, you know, I came in with a certain set of expertise and skills that were not being respected." Participant 2 said, "And I know the time was probably the one of the highest educated people there... And the way I was talked to by some of those people as if like, I didn't understand things, it was demeaning."

*Burnout.* The theme of burnout was expressed by 12 of the participants (80%) when answering the question. Keywords such as, were used as descriptions in their answers. For instance, Participant 5 shared their thoughts saying, "You come into this world ready to make a change and see that due to pushback your initiative constantly has limited impact which is exhausting." To illustrate further, Participant 6 added:

> I felt very much like I was just in this space where I'm just really stressed and tired. And when you're tired like that, especially when it comes to equity work because equity work is both about the self and others and your relationship to others. Because you're trying to make systems better for people. So, when it gets to be. When you get to be too tired, when you get to be burnt out, and that's when I was burnt out, then it comes also at the sacrifice of your ability to help others in situations.

Participant 10 added, "It's exhausting, the energy that I have to put out to make people understand."

**Interview Question 4.** IQ4 asked, "Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you." and the following analysis for this interview question yielded four themes (a) Intersecting Identities, (b) Lack of Authority, (c) Managing Up, and (d) Balance. Figure 2 presents a visual bar graph of common themes and the count.

**Figure 2**

*Interview Question 4: Coding Results*
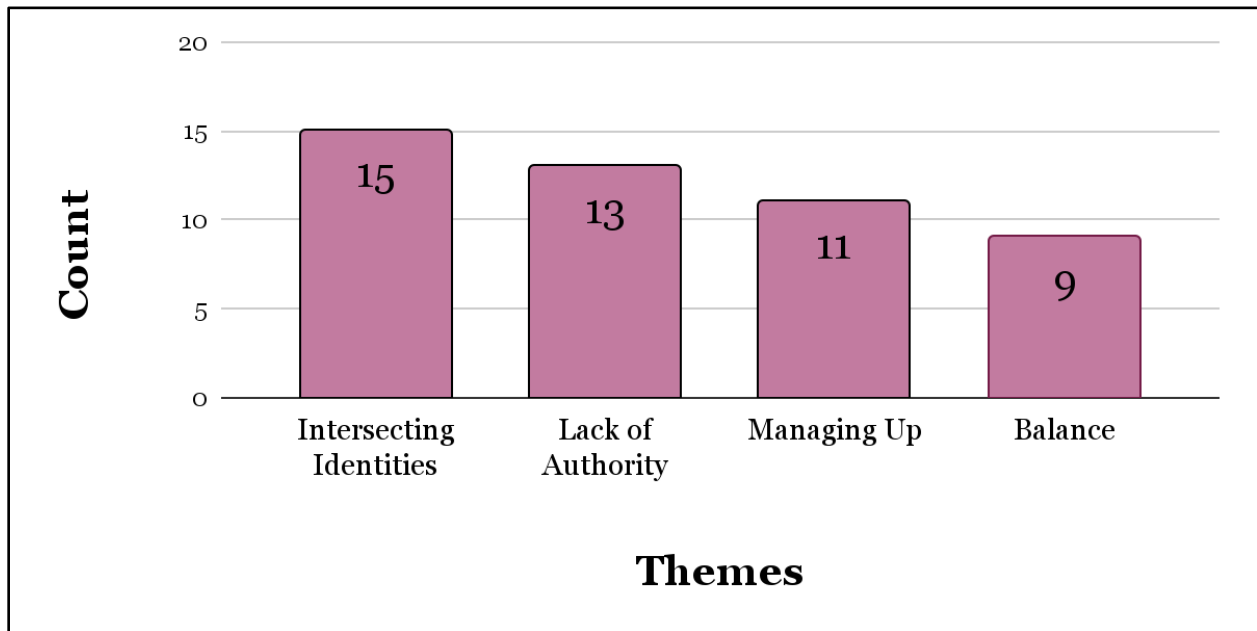


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 2 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

*Intersecting Identities*. The theme emerged as one of the most prevalent thoughts of all

15 participants who were interviewed (100%). Keywords and phrases participants shared were

*intersectionality*, *racial and gender identity, stereotypes, and conflicting expectations.*

Participant 7 stated, "In my identity, I have been considered, you know, aggressive in these

identities. I have literally been saying, you know, you may not understand the plight of different

individuals. So, I've always had to explain who I am. Because people automatically look at me

and associate anything they want to whether it's anger, whether it's my sexual orientation, gender

identity, how it has to come up in that space." To illustrate further, Participant 4 said, "I think my

culture is rarely validated and researched, so in these academic spaces I receive tons of pushback when I advocate for my community." To further illustrate, Participant 15 said:

I try to be reflective and ask myself, "What does it mean to navigate being black and being a woman?" In meetings when my ideas are consistently dismissed, I look around the room. And I'm like, well, there's other black women in here. So, it can't be the fact that I'm black. There's other women in here. So, it can't be the fact that I'm a woman. So, what is it?"

Participant 8 added, "It's not that they haven't done anything to make me believe that I'm just being judged because I am a darker-skinned Black woman." Participant 1 mentioned, "You hired me as the expert, yet what the expert is recommending you don't want to hear, and I can't help but feel like some of that has to do with the fact that I am a woman."

**_Lack of Authority_**. The second theme that came from participant responses was centered around lack of authority received from others. Thirteen participants (87%) used this phrase to *describe their own professional experience in higher education* in response to the interview question. Participant 9 said, "I came in with a certain set of expertise and skills that were not being respected." To illustrate further, Participant 9 noted:

And that's really, that's the thing that frustrates me the most is like I need to be in a position where I have a little bit more authority and power just even by the stupid title alone, just so that I can walk into a room and like, you know, have my expertise respected. I mean, it's really stressful. It's, and that's something I noticed in my last position, which is one of the reasons why I went searching for a different job. Because it's incredibly stressful. It's incredibly demoralizing.

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Participant 6 said, "And that to me the problem, I think, with equity work, is always the power

imbalance. It is one of the biggest challenges that we confront."

   *Managing Up.* This theme emerged with the researcher crafting a new term based on

participants' responses called managing up. This term *managing up*, as the researcher notes, is

defined as when a professional works to cultivate a productive working rapport with their

supervisor while also teaching the job at the same time. Eleven participants (73%) responded to

IQ4 using keywords and phrases such as, *reciprocal growth, not being poured into, constantly*

*teaching, overburdened with responsibility, and lack of understanding*. Statements from four

participants acknowledged this term. For instance, Participant 1 said,

   ... people in positions of power, come in, they want things to happen, or they want you to

   do things, or they want certain programs to be created. But they don't do it in

   collaboration with you, that's kind of like very top-down relationship. And you have to

   waste a lot of time doing something that you know, is not going to work, being like it

   didn't work.

Participant 13 noted that they experienced a similar fact saying:

   I appreciated that second gentleman I believe meant well, but I do think that there were

   certain things that as a white male, he did not understand and grasp. So, a lot of the times

   I felt as though I was educating and did not necessarily feel like I was being poured into,

   right, because you should be growing as well as a leader didn't necessarily feel as though

   that was being reciprocated.

Participant 1 added, "Sometimes when you are brought into this position, and it is new to the

institution it doesn't necessarily feel as though what I was bringing to the table was being

reciprocated. It just felt like I was doing my job and teaching the job at the same time." Lastly,

Participant 5 said, "... so you come into this role and already feel as though you have reached your growth potential."

*Balance.* Another common theme among participant responses was balance. This keyword was used by nine (60%) out of the 15 responses to *describe the struggle between taking care of oneself and the dedication to the work.* This can be illustrated by Participant 14 who noted that, "we're treading this balance of like, take care of myself, but this is the work I love to do." In addition, Participant 3 said, "Like this is like this work gives me life, but my life is like, my body and I need to feed this properly as well."

**Interview Question 7.** IQ7 asked participants, What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J practitioner? The following themes emerged following data analysis: (a) microaggression and tokenism, (b) well-being, and (c) cultural discomfort. Figure 3 portrays a visual through a frequency bar graph which shows the number of answers provided for each theme that emerged.

**Figure 3**

*Interview Question 7: Coding Results*
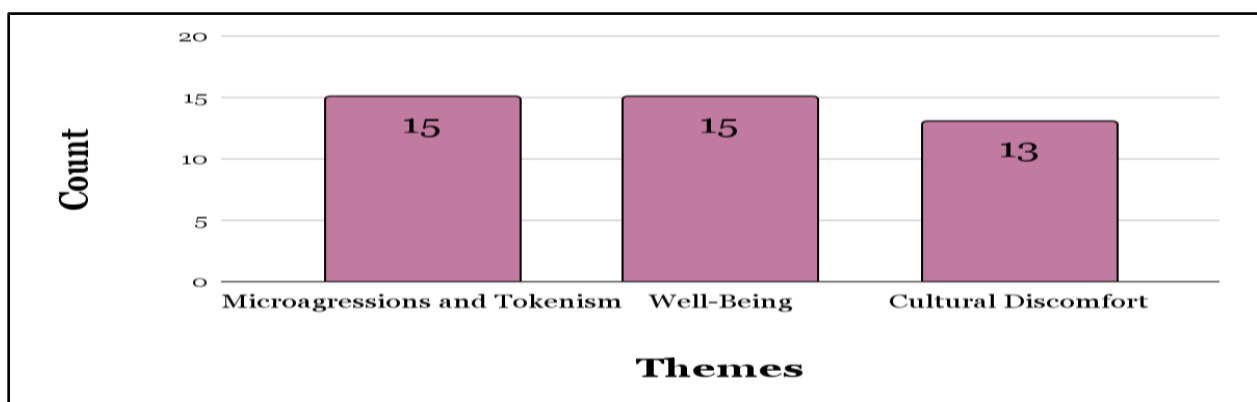


*Note.* n = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 3 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

***Microaggressions and Tokenism***. This theme was most prevalent as all 15 participants (100%) provided lived experiences of racism, tokenism and microaggressions throughout their professional journey in higher education. Keywords and phrases shared by participants were *perceptions of aggression based on race and gender, stereotypes, discrimination, unsettling situations and insensitive questions.* For instance, Participant 6 said, "And just being a checkbox and being tasked with leading programming where the main questions are ones like, "Why can't I say the N word?" Like, seriously are we still at this place despite all the work we can do to make a real impact." Another participant, Participant 3 expressed, "At my institution there are individuals in positions of power who are inherently doing and saying problematic things and because they're not being held accountable, it's not going to change." Participant 2 said, "I have to be very direct with people and say, "I, as a Black woman, feel this" to make them understand. I call it 'well-crafted vulnerability,' revealing certain things about my own identity to set people straight because I am not the stereotype they see in their mind." Further, Participant 1 shares, "...the fact that we will be in rooms where people are going to assume that we're there to get them coffee and explain "oh you know it's because I am really tired." Or you know, you walk into these professional spaces where people mispronounce your name, and instead of trying to learn or self-correct they blow it off or I have even had someone say "awkward" and laugh when I corrected the pronunciation of my name."

***Well-Being***. The theme of well-being was prevalent with all the participants (100%) who responded to this question. The most notable phrases used to describe the well-being of respondents were *self-care and self-love in the face of systemic hate, negative impact on mental, physical and emotional health and constant exposure to and engagement with issues of discrimination and oppression*. Participant 8 shared:

But I went from being able to talk to friends and family like all the time and wanting to

go out and be or being around to quite literally calling people back and like hoping that

they didn't answer the phone, so that I could justify not having to speak when I got home

or not having to engage because I was at such a low point at this time.

Participant 14 responded to this question saying, "You're depressed, you're anxious and you're

overstimulated." Another participant, Participant 2 said:

I try to remember each day why I do this work to stay motivated. You do this work each

day to remove barriers and create a better culture on campus, yet how do we continue to

do that when we have people who are younger than me, who can look at me in my face,

like the students, and call me a lot of my names and not once have I disrespected them,

nor can I do the same to you because someone will tell me, you know better and this

person doesn't, right, because I am the DEI girl. Sometimes I just want to get away from

this.

Participant 1 noted:

People used my transparency and vulnerability and weaponized it against me. And so

definitely after being at my last institution and knowing the toll that that took on me in

terms of my mental health, I was steadily declining into a depressive episode over the

course of four and a half years, my mental health was severely terrible.

Participant 3 articulated further:

Even this semester, because of the harmful experiences I had with students with no

support from my leadership really shook me to the point where I actually decided not to

teach the next semester… My job is to fight racism, sexism, you know, the isms and

phobias, but it's extremely taxing when these isms and phobias are targeted at you while

you are trying to fight against them for others as well.

Participant 7 replied, "Self-love, self-care? What does that look like when you've been taught to

hate your existence for so long?" and with that "How much self-care is beneficial to this? I don't

know if it's enough candles or Spring Mountain Range trips." Lasty, Participant 2, shared, "It

was actually a woman in leadership who really almost pushed me out the door. She made me feel

small all the time, no matter what I did."

 ***Cultural Discomfort.*** Approximately 13 participants (87%) made note of the cultural

discomfort felt at their institutions in a multiplicity of ways through keyword and phrases, such

as *navigating predominantly white spaces, not feeling a sense of belonging in organizational*

*landscape, lack of communication and community, disconnect between institutional leadership*

*and department, struggles with cultural understanding and feeling the burden of responsibility*

*despite resistance.* For instance, Participant 12 explained, "There seems to be a disconnect

between amongst our leadership and our department with how they are interacting with us. Like

there seems to be like a little bit of beef, and we were confused on how this began and why."

Participant 9 said, "Once I do something that doesn't fit the needs of certain people, then my

identities become an issue and my ideas, and my team begin to receive pushback." In addition,

Participant 2 noted, "you pay me to come tell you what you already know. So even with my

feedback or insight, they continue to be problematic." Participant 7 further articulates:

 In my exit interview, I told my supervisor, you are a part of the problem. I told her "I've

 been in elevators with you, and you haven't spoken. Like I've walked into rooms, and

 you've never spoken to me like as a Black woman that joined this unit. After you have

 been here. You never reached out. You never offered mentorship, you never offered

community." I said it because she needed to be held accountable and know that she was cultivating this environment.

*Summary of Research Question 1*

The purpose of RQ1 was to identify what challenges Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education. A total of 10 themes emerged through data analysis of the participant responses provided to the three interview questions surrounding their lived experiences. The 10 themes identified were (a) superficial support, (b) dismissive actions, (c) burnout, (d) intersecting identities, (e) lack of authority, (f) managing up, (g) balance, (h) microaggressions and tokenism, (i) well-being and (j) cultural discomfort.

*Research Question 2*

The second research question (RQ2) asked, What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? Participants were asked a total of six interview questions related to RQ2. The interview questions asked are as follows:

- IQ2: How did you deal with this challenge?
- IQ3: What did you learn?
- IQ5: How did you deal with this challenge?
- IQ6: What did you learn?
- IQ8: How did you deal with this challenge?
- IQ9: What did you learn?

The responses from the participants were analyzed to determine the common areas which were grouped and identified into themes to address the practices and strategies Black women DEI&J

practitioners utilize. The answers were coded as the overall response for RQ2, and recurring themes were seen in participants' responses.

Interview Question 2. IQ2 asked, What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? Based on the answers received by participants in the response to the question, three themes emerged after the data analysis were (a) support group, (b) leverage experience, and (c) resignation. Figure 4 depicts the themes and number of answers as a visual representation through the frequency bar graph. The numbers for each answer represent the multiple responses per participant.

**Figure 4**

*Interview Question 2: Coding Results*
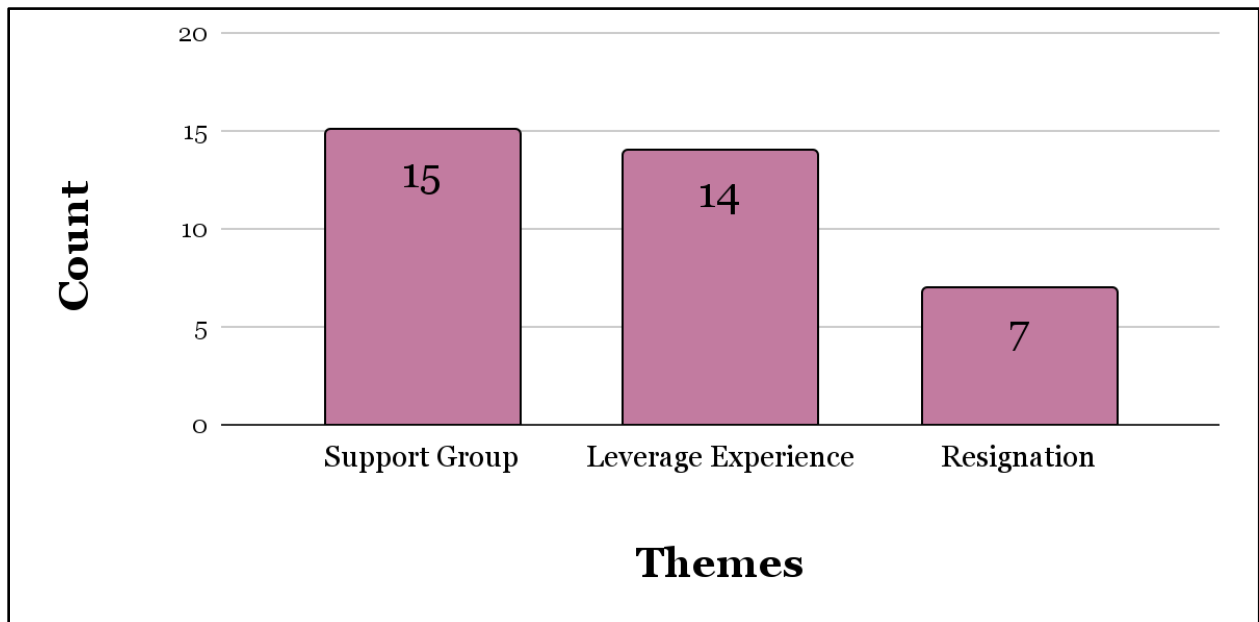


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 4 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

***Support Group.*** The main theme which emerged from 100% of the participants was mentorship as one of the key strategies they used to overcome challenges Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face in higher education. Participant 3 said, "A group of friends, and I just started a... we just started with the GroupMe application to share our feelings, thoughts, vent and just even share some memes to laugh because we all get it." To illustrate this fact, Participant 9 stated, "I feel like I can really trust my team, that they will be supportive that if anything, like this happens that they will be able to be there to either, you know, shed light on any gaslighting that may be happening being like no, like this is real." Participant 8 said, "I have a really supportive and healthy group that is getting feedback from them about our trajectory. Because I think it's always an upward trajectory, I think it's, this work is always iterative." Participant 6 said, "So I speak with my mentor like, "How do I deal with this?" so she said, you got to put your big girl pant on and go do the work you went there to do."

***Leverage Experience.*** The next theme emerged based on the participant responses was on asserting oneself. The response by 14 participants (93%) had keywords and phrases of *self-advocacy, set people straight, opportunities, assertiveness, pushback, be straightforward.* Participant 4 said, "I am not going to sit there and kiss up to you if you are wrong and are choosing to not do the work needed to understand the work you brought me here to do. With love, I am going to tell you that you are wrong." Participant 6 said:

> I will reveal certain things about my own identity in order to kind of set people straight in a particular conversation that I'm having. I'm also, you know, I think I am lucky in the sense to have a PhD. And so there are some, some moments where I will try and just sort of drop that fact, in a conversation just so that people know, like, I'm not coming, you know, again, I respect all people from all different types of education, formal or not, but

especially when you're at institutions, like an Ivy League, you just have to, like, really

stake your claim in ways that, like, you know, it's just like, I call it like, peacocking. You

know, like everyone here peacocks. And this is, like, so ridiculous sometimes, but I have

to do it too, in order to sort of set people straight and be like, I'm not here to play. Like, I

also put my blood sweat and tears into a lot of a lifetime of research into this work, so I

do know what I am talking about.

In addition, Participant 6 shared, "They're gonna always think that they got a better answer and a

better solution. But you have to stand 10 toes down and say, no, I believe I have passion for this

work."

*Resignation.* The third theme, resignation, was given by seven participants (47%) with

phrases used to describe their answers, such as *personal aspirations, leaving the institution,*

*alternative career paths outside of diversity work, and considering limitations in DEI work.* For

example, Participant 14 said, "You can burn yourself out when you try to fight every single

battle." Further, Participant 3 shared that:

For example, the pandemic really did, I think, mess up a lot. And we were in sort of

emergency mode the entire time. And then like that emergency mode never stopped. So, I

was like, working like, you know, 60-hour weeks, it was just, it was really ridiculous.

And during the pandemic, I totally got that, like, we were helping people transition, we

were helping people teach online, I was learning this stuff, like literally the night before,

like how to zoom, and then the next day giving workshops on it. So, I was like, I just had

reached the point of burnout. And so, I started looking for a new position outside of

higher education and this field.

Participant 8 said, "When you're ready to, if you're ready to get out of DEI work, do not feel bad, do not feel like you are a sellout. When you're ready to bow out of this world, bow out of the world because the burnout is real."

**Interview Question 3.** IQ3 asked, What did you learn? From the data analysis conducted on participant responses and recurring keywords and phrases, a total of three themes were identified regarding the resources used or wished was available to the participants regarding their feelings of tokenism, fatigue and being undervalued. The three themes were (a) network, (b) inter-institutional support, and (c) self-awareness. Figure 5 depicts the themes and number of answers as a visual representation through the frequency bar graph. The numbers for each answer represent the multiple responses per participant.

**Figure 5**

*Interview Question 3: Coding Results*
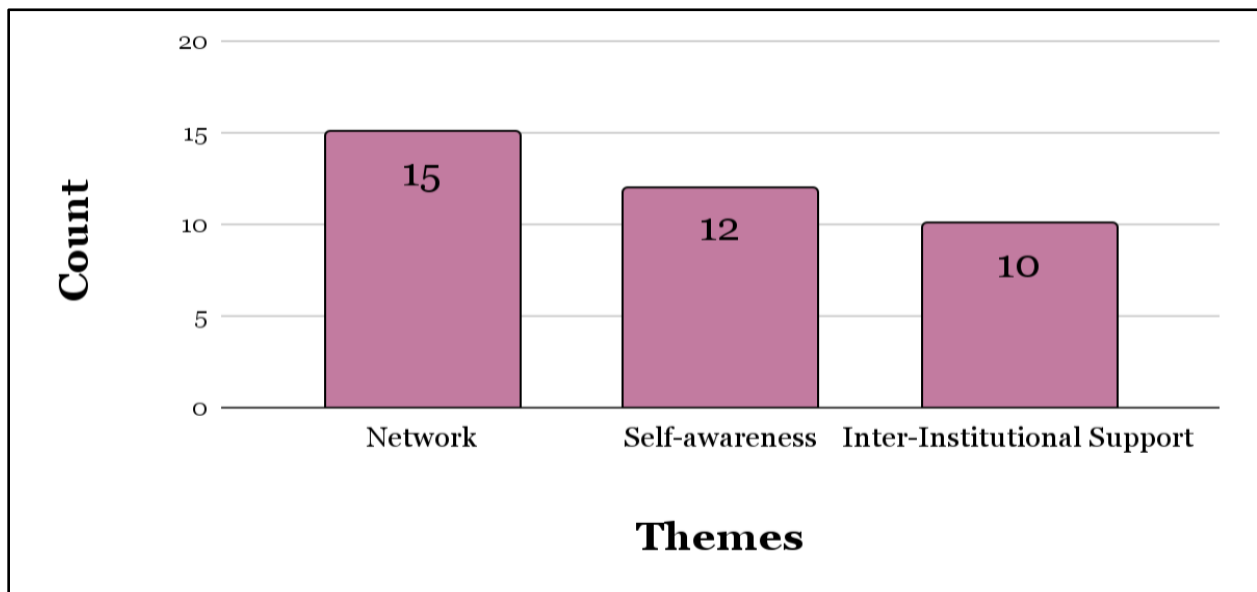


*Note.* n = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 5 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

*Network.* The theme of network emerged as the key theme since 100% of the participants answered networking as a skill learned while navigating through higher education. The keywords and phrases included, *external perspective, women of color, diversity conferences, solace in support and cultivating relationships.* Participant 15 expressed, "I think the power of networking is understated… it's kind of a survival thing." Participant 11 said, "It's really important to reach out and build a network as soon as possible." Participant 4 added, "... and it's even more important to have people at other institutions." Additionally, Participant 7 said:

> I remember my mentor, who was now a chancellor of a college, a powerful Black woman told me to find community, she's like "you can't even believe how many haters you will have"... she was right, I have received hate from co-workers calling me extra names like the B-word, and while that may be part of fighting for equity, again, that's where you have great mentors or friends. I have a pretty great circle of women of color and girlfriends that make all the difference.

Participant 1 said, "So we get together I want to say once a semester, I think it is so we get together and talk about what are some trends or things that we're working on that's going on, whether it's supporting each other, or it might be issues or concerns that we want to bring forward to the national organization. So those are definitely my outlets and then going to DEI conferences, like NADOHE, every single year." Participant 9 shared, "It is really nice to just be around people who have the same goal of equity. We don't not have to explain ourselves and are able to come together around really challenging topics." Lastly, Participant 2 said, "I think we don't need to suffer in silence. So, I cultivated a community with other diversity officers across the country and it's great to be able to call them whether it's to vent, scream, cry, share or you know, ask for feedback."

***Self-Awareness.*** The third theme that emerged was having self-awareness. Approximately 13 of the 15 participants (87%) answered this question using keywords and phrases, such as *recognizing mental and emotional decline, unlearning, DEI commitment, perception as diversity police, overcompensation, and reflection.* Participant 8 shared:

I think early in my career I overcompensated way more and way more accommodating. But I'm slowly undoing that and just being like this is it like this is what you get. And if you don't like my speech pattern, or I don't feel academic enough to you like, I don't know what to tell you. Like you feel too formal to me, you feel stuffy, like I write like starting to flip that like why am I having to do gymnastics in my mind for how I love to talk and feel sounds here, and you're not having to do that. So, I think that has changed over time.

In addition, Participant 13 said,

I think that's probably, in my opinion, one of the biggest barriers. Because if you understand the work, but everyone around you doesn't understand the work, you're gonna be hit with so many roadblocks. Or there's also the notion of being the diversity police. Right, people walking on eggshells thinking that you're going to have some type of complaint against them.

***Inter-Institutional Support.*** The theme of a need for inter-institutional support was a key theme for this interview question with 10 participants (67%) noting that inter-institutional support was critical to creating successful outcomes, in their experience, at higher education institutions. The keywords and phrases included, *extra institutional support, support team, professional empowerment, limited impact.* Participant 1 said:

If you're often the only woman or person or color, you're lacking inter-institutional

support. And so, it's really important to have some of that extra institutional support, even

from people at other institutions because people who don't really know your institution

can help parse out, you know, what's happening, if an incident happens, or if you just feel

like you're struggling. And I think that to me, for me, has been the greatest thing that has

sustained me in this line of work.

Participant 12 articulated, "I had to leave my previous institution because I had no support. Like

I wish this was an area I recognized earlier in my career and that I really leaned into sooner,

because I think that that would have helped me better regulate myself and support myself better

in these environments that inherently are harmful to me."

**Interview Question 5.** IQ5 asked, How did you deal with this challenge? Based on the

data analysis conducted on the response and the main keywords and phrases, a total of two

themes were identified to deal with challenges at their institutions. The two themes that that

transpired were (a) goal oriented, (b) growth mindset, and (c) manage resistance. Figure 6

depicts the themes and number of answers as a visual representation through the frequency bar

graph. The numbers for each answer represent the multiple responses per participant.

**Figure 6**

*Interview Question 5: Coding Results*



Bar chart titled with y-axis "Count" (0 to 20) and x-axis "Themes." Growth Mindset = 10, Manage Resistance = 9, Goal Oriented = 8.
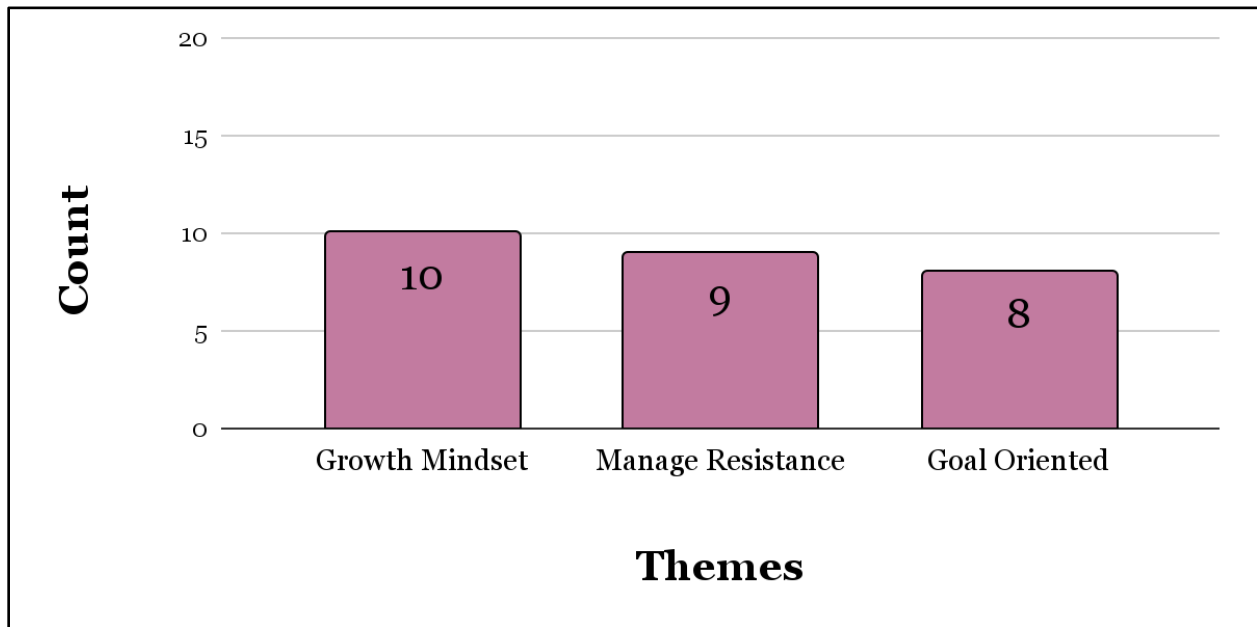
*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 6 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

   ***Growth Mindset.*** The theme reflective mindset was prevalent with ten of the participants

(67%) who answered this question. The most notable phrases used to describe this theme were

*survival tactics, be tough, be reflective and quick witted.* For instance, Participant 7 said,

"Instead of me taking it personally I had to recognize, from like an institutional work standpoint,

that y'all just were not effective in your communication and that is out of my control."

Additionally, Participant 1 shared, "When we have to have hard conversations, we can have it

but I'm not going to sugarcoat anything. And I think, for me that was taught because I've had to

always just survive, so I'm gonna use my survival tactics, but it's going to be rooted in education

and experiences."

***Manage Resistance.*** Approximately nine participants (60%) discussed using *resilience to manage resistance* as a common phrase as an approach used to work in the field of diversity in higher education. Participant 15 said: "You have to have thick skin." Participant 10 stated, "It can be really hard to stay motivated when the fruits of that labor aren't seen or when people are more resistant than you are anticipating. You must be able to be at peace with that, instead of letting it haunt us, that is important."

***Goal Oriented.*** This theme emerged based on participant responses being centered on the need to be *goal oriented, track your progress, be conscious of your goals and knowledgeable.* This phrase was a common approach to working in the field of diversity at higher education institutions by eight of the 15 participants (53%). Participant 14 shared, "You have to have a goal-oriented mindset in this work." Another participant, Participant 9 shared, "I had to reframe my thinking. So, I asked myself "How do I stealthily get these people?" and that's a subtle strategy I use to accomplish my goals at work to work around the biases in my institution."

**Interview Question 6.** IQ6 asked participants, What did you learn? The following analysis for these questions uncovered two themes (a) challenge expectations, (b) communication and (c) constituent needs. Figure 7 depicts the themes and number of answers as a visual representation through the frequency bar graph. The numbers for each answer represent the multiple responses per participant.

**Figure 7**

*Interview Question 6: Coding Results*
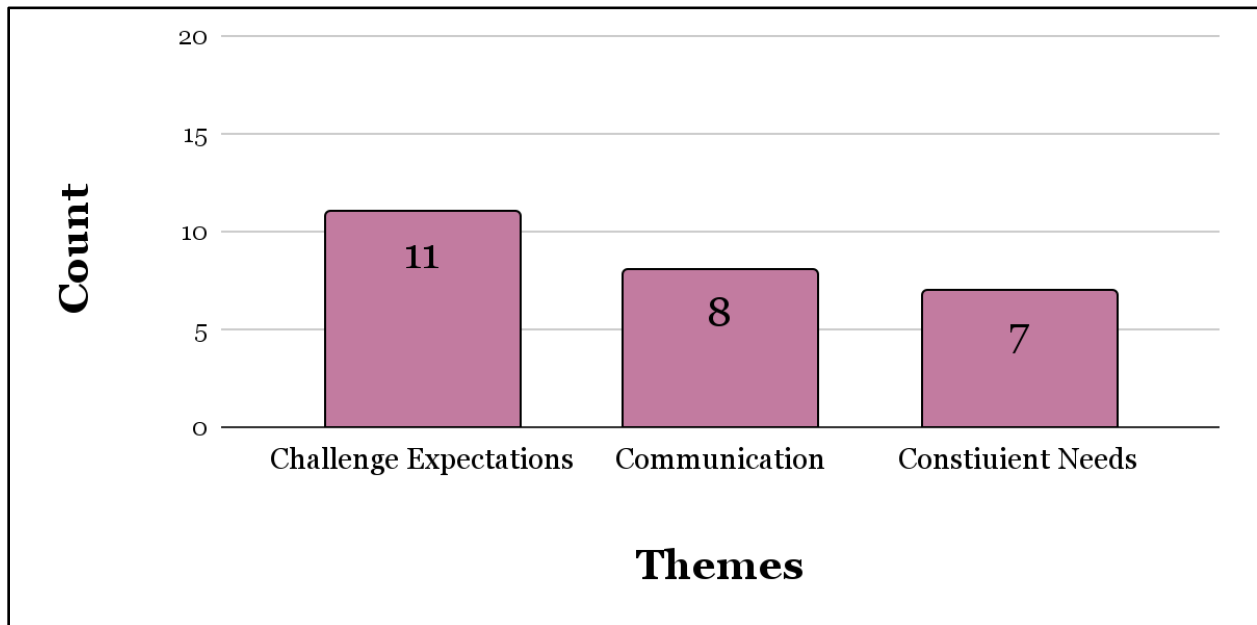


*Note.* $n = 15$; multiple responses per interviewee.

*Note.* Figure 7 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

*Challenge Expectations*. The theme, challenge expectations, was the most common topic which was uncovered as one of the main learned strategies 11 of the 15 participants (73%) noted using to navigate diversity work at higher education institutions. Keywords and phrases in relation to challenging expectations were *societal expectations, navigating assumptions, embracing authentic self.* To illustrate, Participant 11 said, "A lot of people automatically assume a lot about who you are because you are a person of color." In addition, Participant 2 said, "I remember I told my supervisor that I wanted to be a director. They said, 'Oh, at least that'll be in 10-15 years', so I left. And now I've been a director for 13 years, so stop telling Black people what they can and cannot do."

***Communication.*** This theme of communication emerged after data review as one of the most prevalent thoughts of the eight participants (53%) stated were *be specific, give acknowledgment, reach out, follow up, intervene, advocate, and build a safe space to communicate.* Participant 6 shared, "It's so necessary to be able to provide the spaces for faculty, staff and students to find community and fellowship amongst one another." Participant 13 said, "You cannot do everything so communicating your needs and negotiating when and where to address certain issues is crucial."

***Constituent Needs.*** This theme was not prevalent among participants, however the researcher felt it important to mold this into a theme due to the participants; experiences related to the interview question. Seven participants (47%) responses used key phrases such as *meeting needs, safe spaces, creating change.* Participant 8 stated, "I'm doing this because I want to create something lasting for these students… So, it's me wanting to cultivate change for their experiences because it could very well be my experience, right?" Further, Participant 15 noted, "I learned that to be successful, I must see the embodiment of myself, the students, faculty and staff, that look like me, being our best selves on this campus." Participant 3 shared, "So whether it's students, faculty or staff, I want to be able to put myself in their shoes and be able to recognize the experiences that they're having, reflect on them and find a way to expand on the positive ones and shake out the negative ones."

### *Interview Question 8*

IQ8 asked, How did you deal with this challenge? The following three themes were found after analyzing participant responses. The themes were (a) teaching moments, (b) persistence and (c) empowered advocacy. Figure 8 portrays a visual in the form of a bar graph which shows the number of answers provided for each theme.

**Figure 8**

*Interview Question 8: Coding Results*
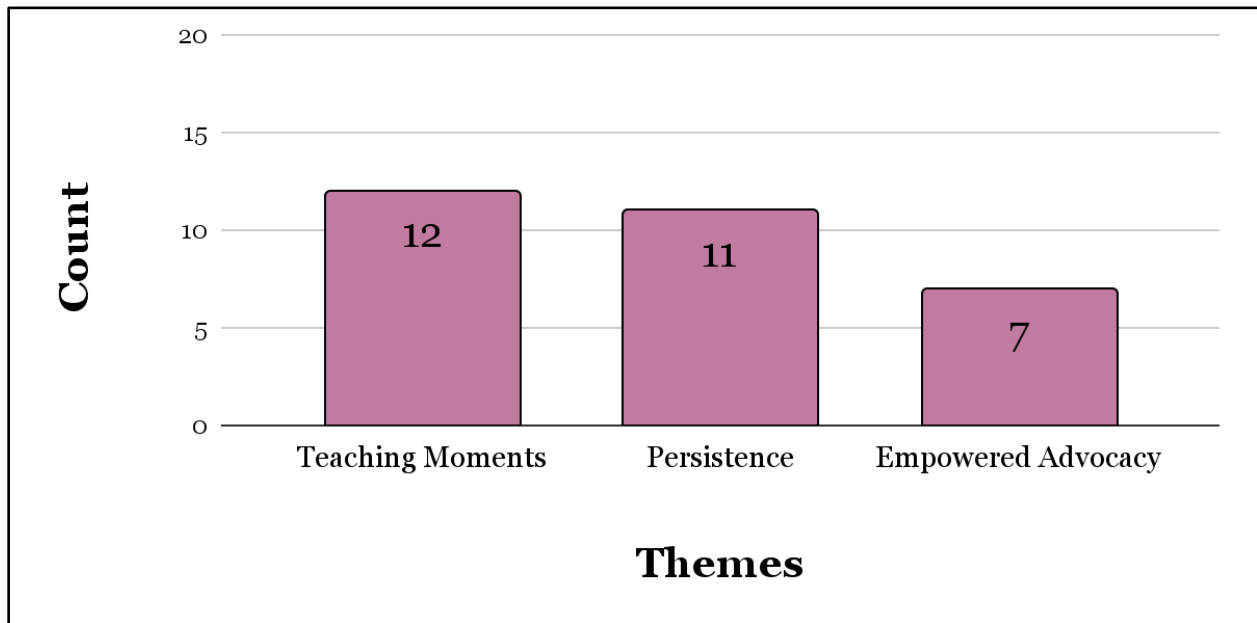


*Note.* $n = 15$; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* This figure shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

*Teaching Moments.* This theme emerged based on participant responses being centered on *using challenges as teaching moments.* This phrase was a common approach to dealing with challenges faced in higher education institutions by 12 of the 15 participants (80%). For example, Participant 13 said, "There's more power in us as a whole in comparison to individualism." Additionally, Participant 8 mentioned that "I believe in helping people feel empowered to advocate for themselves." Participant 6 said, "So that's the biggest thing that I take from these challenges. I don't look at it as an opportunity to get upset and run. I look at it as a teaching moment."

*Persistence.* The second theme, persistence, that emerged was answered by 11 participants (73%) had keywords and phrases of *determination to fight for fairness, keep going, if*

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*not me then who, inspire others.* For instance, Participant 15 said, "Who is going to make sure that my nieces and my nephews and my sister and my brothers and my grandparents can have a fair and equitable space." Participant 12 added to this idea stating, "The reason I keep coming back to this work is because if I stopped, who's going to continue?" In addition, Participant 9 stated, "If I keep fighting, I keep inspiring people." Participant 1 shared, "I'm gonna press forward to get what I need to get from my people and communities" and Participant 6 said, "I know I am making an impact for my community. I am the advocate for someone that I never had." Lastly, Participant 14 shared, "I have to keep going. This work is all of the little pieces of things like helping us get to where we want to be based on a legacy and the ancestors that paved the way for our community."

*Empowered Advocacy.* Another theme that emerged was empowered advocacy. Approximately seven participants (47%) answered this question using keywords and phr*ases* such as, *community empowerment, advocate, challenge inequities, accessing resources and supporting individuals to assert their voices.* Participant 11 said, "Advocacy starts with sort of knowing what situations that you might be in or might be exposed to and being able to speak to those in the room in a way that's direct enough to be heard." Participant 3 noted, "I believe in helping people feel empowered to advocate for themselves… helping them to speak up for themselves and access the tools that they need to change the experience that they're having." Additionally, Participant 10 said, "Being able to provide the spaces for faculty together, students together, or collectively, finding community and fellowship amongst one another is empowering because there's more power in us as a whole in comparison to individualization."

**Interview Question 9**. IQ9 asked, What did you learn? Based on the data analysis conducted on the responses and the main keywords and phrases, a total of four themes transpired

regarding lessons learned through lived experiences as DEI&J practitioners in higher education. The themes were (a) community-oriented, (b) agency, (c) coping mechanisms, (d) gradual progression. Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the themes and count through a bar graph.

**Figure 9**

*Interview Question 9: Coding Results*
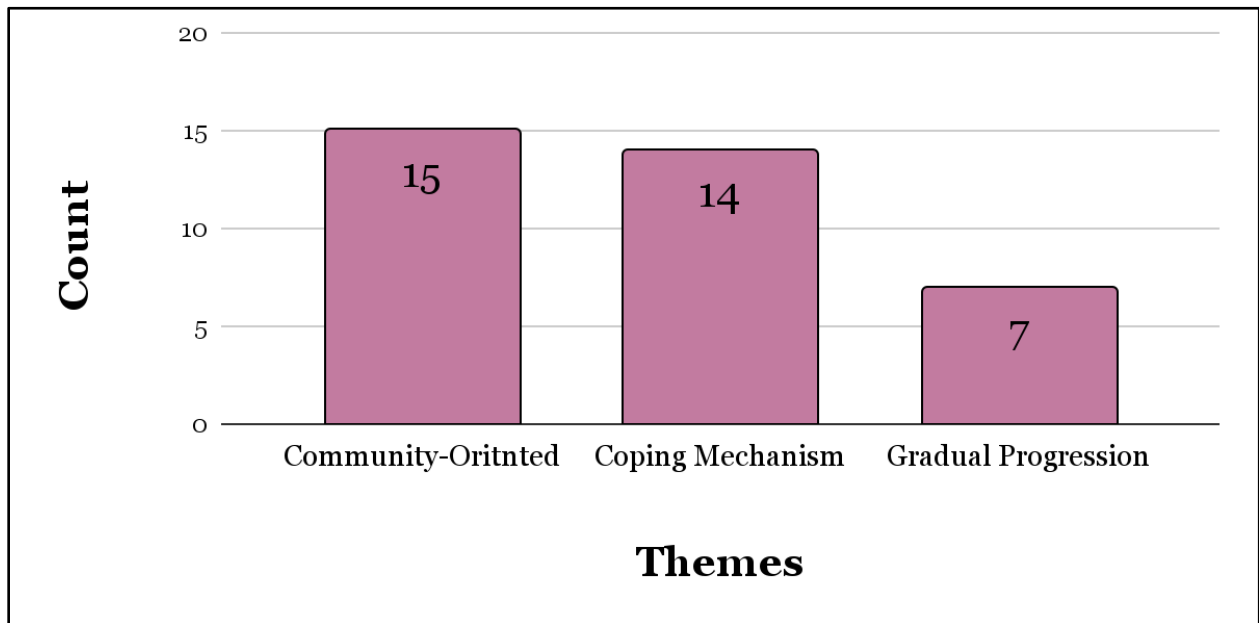


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 9 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

***Community-Oriented.*** The theme of community-oriented emerged as the key theme since 100% of the participants answered community-oriented as a learned lesson they have experienced in their career. The keywords and phrases included, *emphasizing the significance of community building initiatives to establish a solid foundation for DEI&J work, building trust, promoting acceptance, and cultivating an environment conducive to growth.* Participant 2 affirmed this sharing, "In this role, I believe I believe every CDO should see themselves as an

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advocate and I don't know if this is me as a DEI person, as a woman of color, or just who I am." Participant 7 said, "our work is literally just community building at the very beginning, because you got to get people being okay with being amongst each other." Participant 3 stated, "If our value if our institutional value is being equitable, and being inclusive, anyone who does not believe in that cannot be in our community. That is harmful. Inclusion does not mean we also allow bigotry and racism and homophobia and transphobia in the space inherently that is not inclusive." Lastly, Participant 11 said, "As a leader, I don't need to know everything, but if I got the right people on my team that do, we're all gonna see that is a good philosophy."

      ***Coping Mechanisms*.** This theme emerged as a prevalent thought amongst 14 of the 15 participants who answered this question (93%). Keywords and phrases stated by participants were *taking naps, finding space, reactions, emotional response and coping strategies.* Participant 7 stated:

> Instead of me trying to bend over backwards to appease people who didn't have the common decency, or courtesy to communicate with me on the front end, instead of me fixing it, I allowed y'all to let it be messed up. Because right, again, as Black women, a lot of times, we try to accommodate it. And we'll end up doing our job and everyone else's too, so the machine keeps running. No, not anymore.

Participant 13 said, "I'm not fixing those problems anymore. I'm not bending over backwards." To illustrate, Participant 6 said, "I had decided to choose myself, like to be well or not to be well. And that's what I've been working on." Additionally, Participant 2 said, "As someone who leans heavy on venting or naps and stuff like that, I also have those are the moments where I'm not a misery likes company type person, if I'm in a space where it needs space, I'm gonna take it I'm gonna just be silent by myself."

***Gradual Progression.*** This theme was not prevalent among participants, however the researcher felt it important to mold this into a theme due to the participants; experiences related to the interview question. 7 participants (47%) responses used key phrases such as *emphasizing the significance of starting with small steps.* Participant 1 said, "You have to start off slow. It's the minimal things that you have to do." In addition, Participant 7 said, "It's literally just community building at the very beginning because you got to get people to be okay with being amongst each other." Participant 2 noted, "It taught me that a lot of the success of the institution has everything to do with people's willingness to see you."

*Summary of Research Question 2*

The purpose of RQ2 was to identify practices Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome challenges faced at higher education institutions. A total of 18 themes were uncovered through the analysis of keywords, phrases and responses; these identified themes were (a) support group, (b) levering experience, (c) resignation, (d) network, (e) need for inter-institutional support, (f) self-awareness, (g) growth mindset, (h) manage resistance, (i) goal oriented, (j) challenge expectations, (k) communication, (l) constituent needs, (m) teaching moments, (n) persistence, (o) empowered advocacy, (p) community-oriented, (q) coping mechanisms, and (r) gradual progression.

*Research Question 3*

Research question three (RQ3) inquired, How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? Participants were asked a total of two interview questions to answer the research question, which were:

- IQ10: How would you define success for you as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

- IQ11: How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity,

  Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

The responses provided by the participants were analyzed to examine commonalities which were

then coded and grouped together to form themes in tracking, measuring and defining success.

      **Interview Question 10.** IQ10 asked, How would you define success for you as a Black

women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

Based on the data analysis conducted on the responses and the main keywords and phrases, a

total of three themes transpired regarding the success being defined. The three themes were (a)

trust, (b) resonance and agreement, and (c) opportunities for growth. Figure 10 provides a visual

representation of the themes and count through a bar graph.

**Figure 10**

*Interview Question 10: Coding Results*
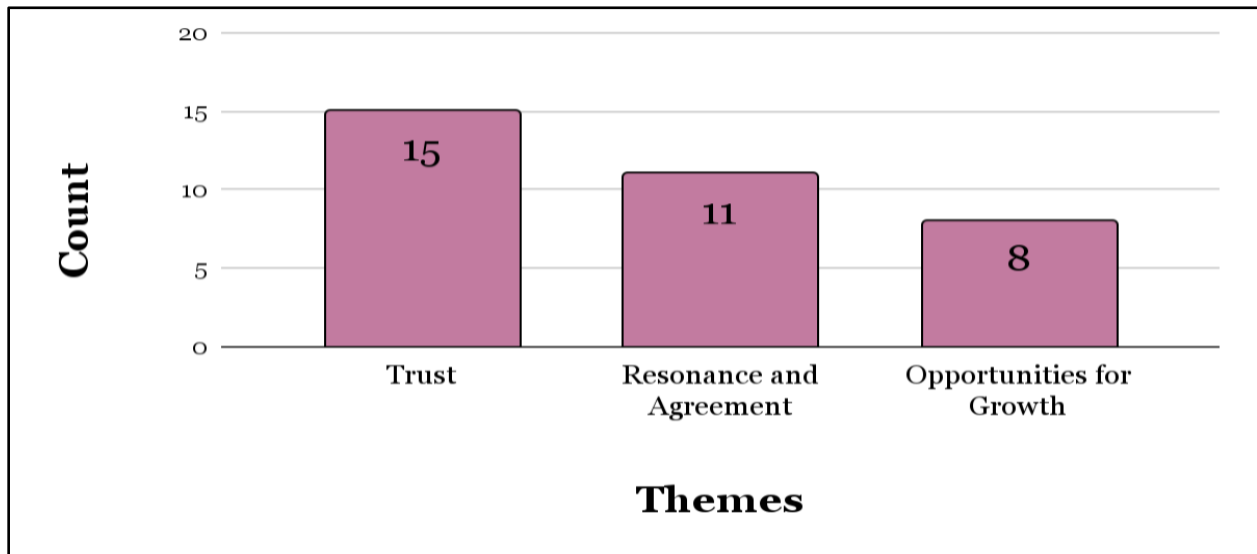


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 10 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their
emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher
education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question
one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these
represents the number of responses stated by participants.

***Trust.*** The theme of trust was a common answer for all of the participants in the study (100%). The keywords and phrases used to describe this theme were *trust-building through return attendance, shifting perspective, engagement, resource-sharing, willingness to change, meaningful connections, expressions of gratitude.* Participant 10 said, "You have to develop trust and community in order to have some of these uncomfortable conversations. Because, unfortunately, a lot of times, there's huge defense mechanisms that are up when you're having these conversations." Participant 15 articulated:

> So, for me, the more relationships that I've been able to cultivate, and people seeking my advice or support, lets me know that I'm doing my job because it means that people are trusting me. And if they're coming to me, and then returning to me, it lets me know that they're doing the work and it worked. And now they're coming to me for advice for the next thing that they need to tackle. And then in terms of community, it's just right, supporting whatever events, programs or initiatives that we have going on. And would that be like numbers showing out or does that do numbers matter? Do they like it if one or two people can come and meet? Is that still a success? Or is it like even if it maybe wasn't your target audience you hoped to reach, is it still successful? The answer is yes, because it's a learning opportunity and if you touch one person or impact one person, they're gonna go and tell somebody else.

Participant 8 added, "In this space, it looks like my colleagues and my students, knowing and trusting that I'm here to work for them. The comments that I get upon graduation are the tears like I'm going to miss you so much or thank you so much. That's how I know I'm successful."

***Resonance and Agreement.*** Eleven participants (73%) had responses which created the theme, resonance and agreement. Keywords and phrases used by participants were *shift*

*perspective, answers provided, reaching people through care and going to a consensus.*

Participant 1 shared "There are shifts in how people have traditionally thought or operated, and it helps us as we lead to find common ground with historically opposing sides or ideologies." Participant 4 said, "And we hope to leave these workshops shifting responsibility from providing answers to changing perspectives." Further, Participant 13 noted, "We have to move the conversation away from deficits and realize that it's not us versus them. but it's about us as a community, like as a whole."

  ***Opportunities for Growth.*** The second most emergent theme was speaking opportunities. Approximately 8 participants (53%) answered this question using keywords and phr*ases such as, opportunities to share, skill recognition, presentation, conferences, provide information, conduct research and use expertise.* Participant 1 said, "But when I hear people ask me to come and give a DEI presentation, be a keynote speaker or lead a workshop which is typically wrapped up in a lot of difficult stuff, it's empowering." Participant 7 said, "As a chief diversity officer, I seek out as much knowledge and professional development as possible. I'm a part of national organizations and part of committees so I can really hone in on my craft."

  **Interview Question 11.** The interview question asked, How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions? Based on the data analysis conducted on the responses and the main keywords and phrases, a total of three themes transpired regarding the success being defined. The three themes were (a) feedback, (b) policy shifts, (c) increased access. and (d) data. Figure 11 provides a visual representation of the themes and count through a bar graph.

**Figure 11**

*Interview Question 11: Coding Results*
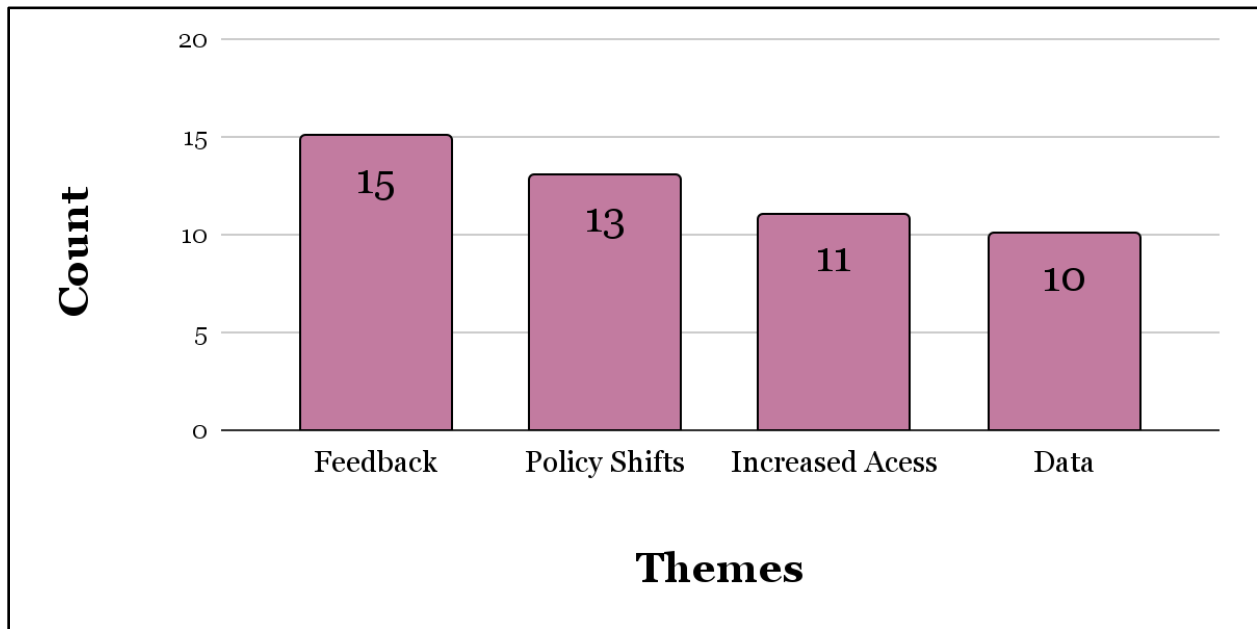


Bar chart titled with y-axis "Count" (0 to 20) and x-axis "Themes". Bars: Feedback = 15, Policy Shifts = 13, Increased Acess = 11, Data = 10.

*Note.* *n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* This figure shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

  ***Feedback.*** This theme was the most prevalent for this question as one of the ways

participants measured and tracked their success.  All 15 participants (100%) used keywords and

phrases such as, *impact on perspective, positive feedback, reflecting on criticism and opposition,*

*and professional feedback.* For instance, Participant 3 said, "I can see the shift and the changes,

even if they're small. In that word, it's not about the salary because the money will never be

enough. I know for a fact, I'm super underpaid, even in higher ed. But what I do see the benefit

of is when we come back, and I see the growth and development and people trying to change,

and people coming back saying "I know I can become a better person because of the way that

you handled the situation." Participant 4 said, "I do offer opportunities for feedback and

assessment at most of the events and workshops that we host. And there's always an opportunity to share something that you've learned, or what other comments you have. When we know better, we do better, right?" Participant 2 said, "Regularly ask people like what's working, what's not working? how can we improve?" Participant 14 shared, "We always want to be finding out where people are and then encourage them to move further with this work." Lastly, Participant 1 added, "You have to separate your personal emotions from professional feedback. There are very systemic, very deeply enriched reasons why people behave or believe what they do, and we need their feedback to know how to support them on this journey."

***Policy Shifts.*** Thirteen participants (87%) discussed how policy shifts aided in their ability to measure and track their success. Keywords and phrases used by the participants to describe their answers were, *policy change of systemic injustices, reallocated funds, safe spaces, equitable practices, and sustainable systemic transformation*. Participant 6 said:

> I think being able to take what you learn and apply it is evidence, if you will, if we need
> to prove evidence of success. And I think from a practical level when I think about and
> I'll come back to the second one about community, but when I think about, again, like a
> general shift in how we just think and act as a society, particularly, again, white people,
> not people of color, when I see policy changes, or shifts or reallocation of dollars."

Participant 9 said:

> I want to advance the people and communities that I represent. So, it is very personal, in
> nature, leading policies, outcomes, resource allocation, and then also personally right like
> growing I love to learn and so I continue to read even though I've been at this for years,
> like I read all the time, new books coming out like I don't have all the answers.

Lastly, Participant 5 stated, "I am planting seeds today that will continue to grow even if I am gone tomorrow. Success for me is creating something that has long-lasting effects and makes systemic changes."

**Increased Access.** The theme of increased access was answered by 11 of the 15 participants (73%). The keywords and phrases used to describe this theme were *cultivating learning, generosity, representation, opportunities for marginalized communities, consistency, authenticity, personal development and growth for staff and students.* Participant 13 said, "Success is figuring out how we change hearts and minds." Participant 4 shared, "I host a book club and we read literally anything from the lived experiences of folks from historically excluded and marginalized communities. And in having these sessions, which are mostly like white women, at this point, who are engaging in book club this semester, someone was like, "I really enjoy this space, because I'm reading and loving books that I would have never picked up." Participant 6 said, "I've always been here for students. And so, for me, success isn't necessarily changing a faculty member's mind, it's getting them to teach better or think more equitably, equitably about their students." Participant 8 noted, "When doing this work, you may be a bit turned off from comments you hear, but you always approach people who want to learn with kindness and love." Participant continued by saying, "So I enjoy speaking to students, faculty, or staff, about whatever experiences they're having. And if it's a negative experience, helping them to speak up for themselves and or access the tools that they need to change the experience that they're having." Lastly, Participant 1 said, "In this space, it looks like my colleagues and my students, being able to come into my office at any moment to speak with me and knowing that I am here to work for them."

**Data.** Approximately 10 of the participants (67%) used keywords and phrases to discuss data as a theme such as, *give value to qualitative measurements, numerical data and metrics, preference for quantitative evaluation of success.* For example, Participant 15 said, "I really prefer qualitative measures rather than quantitative. I like words over numbers because I think it is healthy to get feedback from staff and students about our trajectory. Because I think it's always an upward trajectory, I think it's, this work is always iterative. And we're always changing and responding to historical, historical moments, historical changes, cultural changes, and those things are always changing." Participant 2 articulated, "Using data can be two-fold in this work. I think it shows up in a more qualitative way, if you will, that when I'm in discussions, and I can connect to a quantitative data point from the literature that I learned knowledge of then that's evidence of success." Participant 4 shared, "I have a preference for using numerical data and metrics to evaluate success because while qualitative insight is impactful it helps to also be grounded in numerical data when making initiatives, policies and practice on our campus."

*Summary of Research Question 3*

The purpose of RQ3 was to identify how Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success. A total of seven themes were found through analysis of keywords, phrases and overall responses to the two interview questions. Responses to the question yielded areas that identified the themes in which these diversity professionals expressed practices used to track, measure and define success. The seven themes uncovered were (a) feedback, (b) policy shifts, (c) increased access, (d) data, (e) trust, (g) resonance and agreement, and (h) opportunities for growth.

*Research Question 4*

Research question four (RQ4) asked, What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? Participants were asked a total of two interview questions to answer the research question which were:

- IQ12: If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be?

- IQ13: What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve success?

The responses provided by the participants were analyzed to uncover commonalities which were coded and grouped together to form themes discussing recommendations participants had for other Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners emerging in the field to place them on the path for success.

**Interview Question 12.** The interview question asked, If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be? Based on the data analysis conducted on the responses and the main keywords and phrases, a total of four themes transpired regarding the recommendations provided by the participants. The two themes were personal sacrifice and overcompensation and speaking up. Figure 12 shows the data in a frequency bar graph.

**Figure 12**

*Interview Question 12: Coding Results*
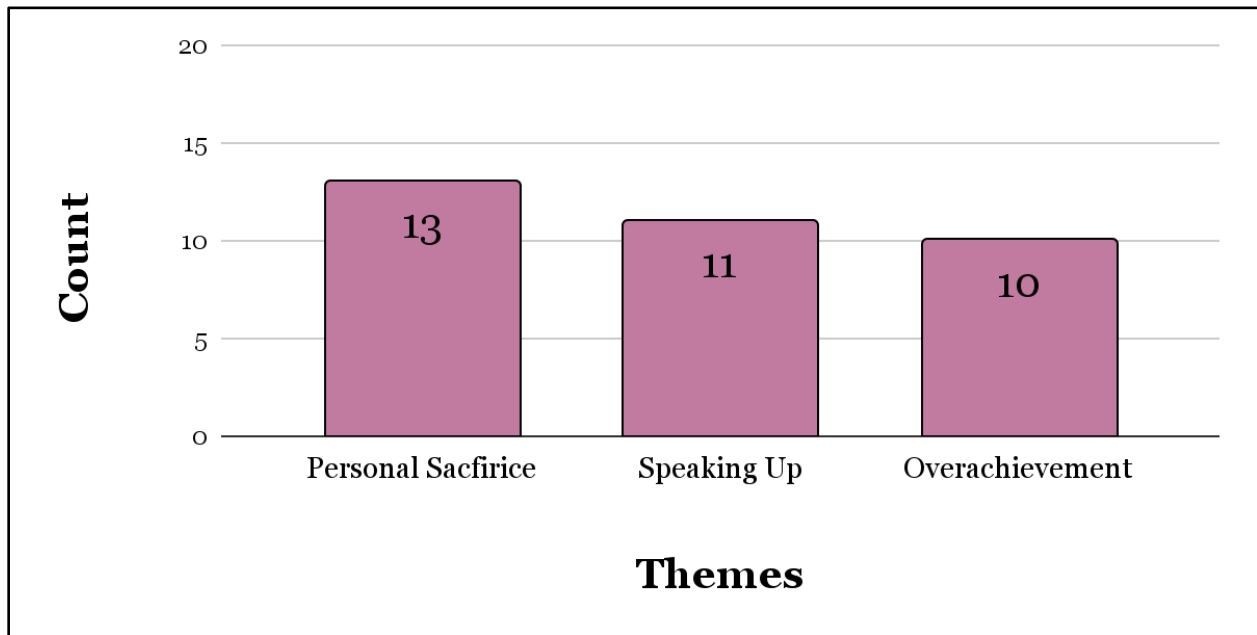


*Note. n* = 15; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 12 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

***Personal Sacrifice*.** At least 12 of the 15 participants (87%) used keywords and phrases to describe the theme of personal sacrifice, such as *emotional and physical toll and external pressures.* Participant 7 said:

> Be firm in what you know. When I first began, I put so much value in being better than the next person. To be honest, it was tiring. And in part, to my career, I work with students and so when you're trying to give to students emotionally, mentally, and support them, right, like you're floundering yourself, as you're trying to juggle all these committees, meetings and presentations …it probably was not a healthy behavior.

Participant 13 stated, "At times it is taxing and tiring. This work doesn't end when you clock out, especially as a Black woman, you face these issues in your personal and professional life. It can break you down because you never have a moment to separate yourself from your work and shoulder the institutional weight of facilitating change for multiple communities."

*Speaking Up.* Eleven participants (73%) had responses which created the theme, speak up. Keywords and phrases used by *participants were authenticity, self-advocacy, speaking up more often, empowered.* Participant 1 said, "For sure, speak up sooner. The level of grace that I was extending to colleagues was not deserved, in some cases. Or there were times or issues that I had like in grad school and I would give people the benefit of the doubt, instead of coming in and asking critical questions." Participant 6 said, "I constantly delayed being assertive because I was afraid. I was afraid to lose my job or be labeled as aggressive when just starting out in my career." In addition, Participant 15 mentioned, "So really, I wish I began choosing me over everything sooner. I didn't know that it was that, like, simple." Lastly, Participant 10 shared, "Walk into this role with your head up, confident that you know what you're doing. And don't allow anyone to push that head down. And remain your authentic self."

*Overachievement.* Of the 15 participants, 10 (67%) provided used keywords and phrases, such as *overcoming skepticism, exceeding expectations*, *identifying expectations*, which created the theme, overachievement. Participant 5 expressed:

> You know it's funny now on LinkedIn you can see everybody's profile and it's always amazing to me how you can see everybody's experience, right, what they put out there and how many people went from like coordinator to an executive within a few years. And I'm like, wow, it must be so nice because you yourself have all these years of work and advanced degrees and get rejected from transitioning from a coordinator to a managerial

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position. And like, you know, these white candidates are out here claiming to be experts

after a year of working in this field, yet these rejections make me question my expertise

and ability."

Participant 6 articulated:

I did everything to try to build the armor, if you will, to be able to go into spaces and with

my CV having literally everything on it like boards, committees, emceeing events,

management roles, mayoral appointments, Harvard programs while working and being in

school full time. And yes, I love to learn, but part of it was, I knew I had to do it because

I needed them as a checkbox to prove myself. And that can take a toll.

Lastly, Participant 4 said, "just do things because you want to do them for you and learn and just

be in the moment versus thinking of how to prove your legitimacy."

**Interview Question 13.** The final interview question asked, What recommendations

would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher

education institutions to ensure they achieve success? Based on the data analysis conducted on

the responses and the main keywords and phrases, a total of six themes transpired regarding the

recommendations provided by the participants. The six themes were embracing mistakes,

strategic thinking and planning, vocal champion, prioritizing well-being, celebrating

achievements, and continuous learning. Below, Figure 13 shows the data in a frequency bar

graph.

**Figure 13**

*Interview Question 13: Coding Results*
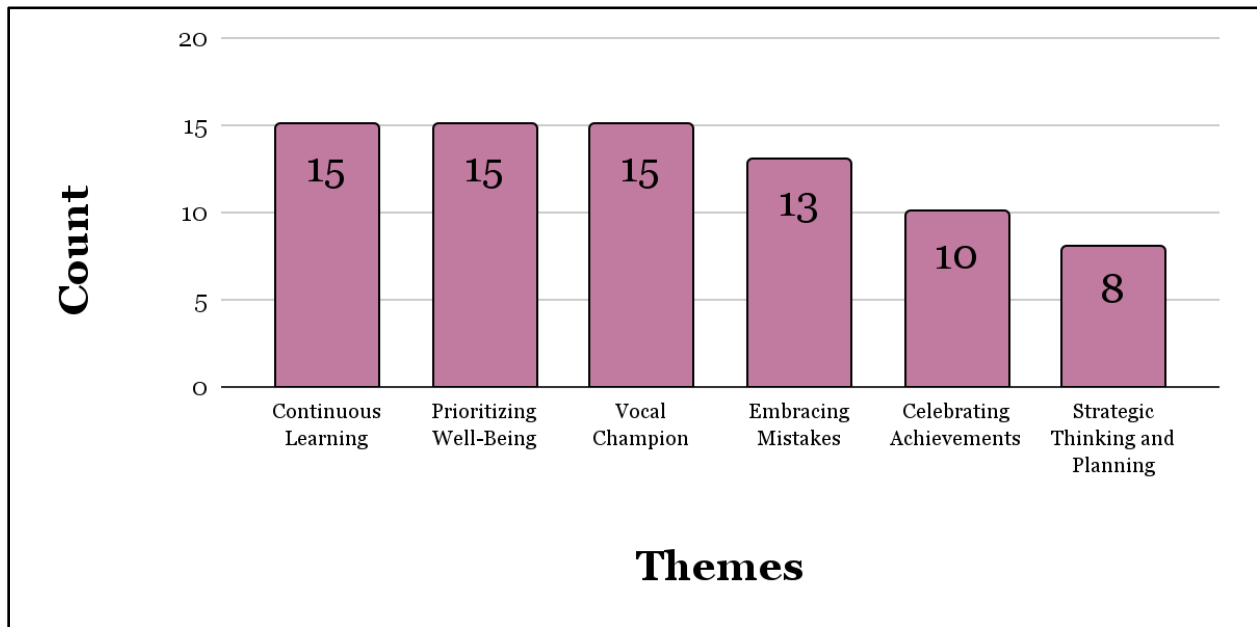


*Note.* $n = 15$; multiple responses per interviewee.
*Note.* Figure 13 shows the analysis and assessment of participant responses regarding how their emotional and physical health was affected after reflecting upon their experiences in higher education institutions as diversity professionals and illustrates the themes for interview question one. All data are presented from the largest to smallest frequency. The number of each of these represents the number of responses stated by participants.

    ***Continuous Learning.*** The theme of continuous learning was prevalent with all of the

participants (100%) who responded to this question. The most notable phrases used to describe

the continuous learning of respondents were *lifelong learning, deepening knowledge, staying*

*updated, developing expertise, shared knowledge, career trajectory, ongoing growth, adaptation,*

*combining personal experiences with academic knowledge, and mastery*. Participant 8 shared,

"We are in an academic setting so know your craft and you better know it well. Pick up a book,

know the literature, know the research, the theories that inform the work." Participant 1 stated,

"Nothing will ever replace firsthand experience as a Black woman, you know your story and

there's the personal part of our craft, our lived experience." In addition, Participant 15, "I owe it

to myself to become a better learner and reader of the literature, about variety of issues of accessibility, so that when they do come up, and they have that I'm not the one who is who was ignorant at that moment, but I'm able to speak to the literature or be a good advocate for those who are experiencing that and say, like, no, like, this is really important."

***Prioritizing Well-Being.*** Another common theme identified by the participants was prioritizing well-being as a recommendation for Black women diversity professionals in higher education. Fifteen of the 15 participants (100%) answered the question with this phrase. Keywords mentioned *wellness, personal mission, self-care, spaces and activities for solace, professional dynamics, and perfectionism, set boundaries, personal refuge.* Participant 9, "I live an abundant life. If I want to leave here tomorrow, I will be paid and I will step away until I have the capacity to do this again." Participant 10 said, "I have had to do things for myself to maintain my mental health, you know, my sanity." In addition, Participant 15 shared, "I had to decide to choose myself, to be well or to not be well and that is one of the toughest things I have been working on." Participant 3 articulated, "You are going to need a space where you can decompress. We all need our own retreat space and again, that speaks to the very real possible burnout that can happen, I think, especially for Black women, because we are so used to advocating for others. And we're so used to doing the work and to do so uncredited and that's really challenging." Further, Participant 3 added:

> Make sure you get your work credited, seriously protect your work. It is very common for people to steal Black women's work, so watermark it or share it out with a group of people who you know are trustworthy so that if someone does try to nab that work, you have a group of people now who confirm these ideas came from you.

Participant 12 said, "Give yourself permission to not beat yourself up for not being perfect every day. You don't have to be superwoman." Participant 5 shared, "You need to have your eyes wide open in these rooms." Participant 8 mentioned, "Just don't get lost in this work and think you got to do something you do not want to or have time for, to please everybody else." Lastly, Participant 2 stated, "Putting myself first has allowed me to continue in this space and just be well and be okay. It has been the best thing I could do for myself."

***Vocal Champion.*** This theme was the most prevalent for this question as a recommendation participants shared as a necessity to ensure professional success. All 15 participants (100%) used keywords and phrases, such as *impact on mentorship, coaching, sponsorship, gain support and access to opportunities.* For instance, Participant 11 articulated:

> If you kind of just fumble through, it is going to be harder, versus connecting with coaches, mentors or sponsors early on in your career and understanding the difference between those three. I think of my mentor, she's a mentor and a sponsor; she absolutely opened the doors for me to get to where I need to be. She wrote the letters, she moved resources, she introduced me to people that I needed to get in front of to do with versus, you know, individuals who have coached me on a topic or how to like work through an interview, like one-time things.

Participant 2, "And I just think about what a huge difference it makes to have a supervisor or have someone in your corner who's really going to advocate for you, who's going to let you be your authentic self, and who's going to support your development and grow."

***Embracing Mistakes.*** The theme of embracing mistakes was a common answer with it being mentioned by 13 of the 15 participants in the study (87%). The keywords and phrases used to describe this theme were *acknowledging fallibility, self-reflection, resilience, conviction in the*

*work, lack of support, finding alternatives, collaboration.* Participant 3 said, "You may not always get it right, and it's okay if you don't." Participant 12 stated, "Everybody is not gonna support your work, everybody's not gonna support the mission that you're on and sometimes they want you to slip up. And if you do, stay committed to the work and know that making mistakes is a part of this journey."

      ***Celebrating Achievements.*** The theme of celebrating achievements was noted for this interview question by 10 participants (67%). The keywords and phrases included, *recognition, achievements, investment in career, empower, excellence and successes.* Participant 7 shared, "Stop and celebrate the wins and the milestones that you have." Participant 6 noted:

> We tend to get wrapped up in checking all these boxes on CVs, because we know we have to be better in professional spaces, and sometimes we wake up and look back and we're like, holy crap, I did all that. It's kind of amazing how Black women can juggle all these identities, spaces and tasks.

In addition, Participant 4 said, "We have Black woman excellence and it's not by accident. We didn't get a little sprinkle of magic, we worked really hard. And so, we're gonna celebrate that and celebrate the other Black women who are around you then you can figure out how to give that pride and joy back to your community or to your students after you are done restoring yourself and being re-grounded in your why."

      ***Strategic Thinking and Planning.*** Approximately eight participants (53%) discussed using strategic planning and thinking as an approach to be successful in the field of diversity at a higher education institution. Keywords and phrases commonly used were *mentoring, strategic planning, continuous improvement and trajectory, thought decision-making, institutional alignment.* Participant 6 articulated:

When you are interviewing for a DEI role, whatever the institutional organization, you

should be interviewing them just as much as they are interviewing you. Especially if

you're a woman of color because you're going to show up in this work, and in this role

differently compared to some other people, you want to make sure that people are ready

to put their money where their mouth is and ensure that the people here are really willing

to do the work.

Participant 13 said, "I think for new practitioners, having those people who are going to help you

through the tough times is vital. Also, think about your career trajectory, get into spaces that if

you want to go up and that's your choice, find environments and people they can unlock some of

those doors that are closed to you." Participant 14 noted, "I think an important measure of

success is to never be satisfied with where you are, but always have a plan for where you want to

be next." Lastly, Participant 2 shared, "Always remember that we are experts of one which is our

own lived embodied experience as for myself as a Black woman in this world, but to there's also

so much more to learn about other racial, ethnic, gender, socio economic experiences, and that, I

need to always go a little bit further beyond my comfort zone in order to be more mindful about

how equity works, for people for whom I don't have a shared lived experience. So that I could be

a good advocate to that end."

### *Summary of Research Question 4*

The purpose of RQ4 was to identify the recommendations Black women Diversity,

Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners had for emerging Black women in this field. A total of

10 themes were found through the analysis of keywords, phrases and overall responses to the two

interview questions. Responses to the questions yielded areas that identified the themes in which

participants provided recommendations in navigating higher education institutions in the field of

diversity. These recommendations were to be provided to Black women diversity practitioners who would read this study. The 8 themes identified were, (a) personal sacrifice, (b) speaking up, (c) overcompensation, (d) embracing mistakes, (e) strategic thinking and planning, (f) vocal champion, (g) prioritizing well-being, (h) celebrating achievements, and (i) continuous learning.

**Chapter Summary**

The main purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the strategies and best practices used by Black women diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice practitioners in higher education to overcome feelings of tokenism, fatigue and being undervalued. Being that this is a phenomenological study, the researcher 15 participants who were Black women working or having worked in higher education institutions within the past five years with a focus on directing the culture of diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice policies, practices, initiatives and programming. The participants answered 13 semi-structured, open-ended interview questions that had the intent to address the following questions:

- RQ1. What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education?

- RQ2. What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges?

- RQ3. How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success?

- RQ4. What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field?

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the results found were based on the phenomenological approach. The data for this study was collected through the 15 interviews which were then

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reviewed, analyzed and coded for thematic results. Following this, the themes drafted by the researcher were then validated through an inter-rater review process by a panel of Pepperdine university doctoral students. The analysis of the data uncovered a total of 41 themes. A summary, through a visual format, of the research questions and themes aligned with each question is presented below in Table 7. The following chapter, Chapter 5, will provide a discussion of the researchers findings, results of the study, a proposed model, implications, recommendations, comments on further research and final thoughts from the researcher.

**Table 7**

*Summary of Themes for the Four Research Questions*

| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | **RQ2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? | **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? | **RQ4:** What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Superficial support | Support group | Feedback | Personal sacrifice |
| Dismissive actions | Leverage experience | Policy shifts | Speaking Up |
| Burnout | Resignation | Increased access | Overcompensation |
| Intersecting identities | Network | Data | Continuous learning Prioritizing well-being |
| Lack of authority | Need for inter-institutional support | Trust | Vocal champion |
| Managing up | Self-awareness | Resonance and agreement | Embracing mistakes |

| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | **RQ2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? | **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? | **RQ4:** What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Balance | Growth mindset | Opportunities for growth | Celebrating achievements |
| Microaggressions and tokenism | Manage resistance | | Strategic thinking and planning |
| Well-being | Goal oriented | | Continuous learning |
| Cultural discomfort | Challenge expectations | | Prioritizing well-being |
| | Communication | | Vocal champion |
| | Constituent needs | | Embracing mistakes |
| | Teaching moments | | Celebrating achievements |
| | Persistence | | |
| | Empowered advocacy | | |
| | Community-oriented | | |
| | Coping mechanisms | | |
| | Gradual progression | | |

*Note.* This table summarizes the common themes found through the data analysis process and is broken down by research question. Each theme represents the answers provided by the participants for each interview question correlated with the main research questions.

**Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, Implications, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

When you put love out in the world it travels, and it can touch people and reach people in ways that we never even expected.

— Audre Lorde

**Introduction to the Study**

The interest among diversity practitioners in returning to academic settings has notably increased over recent years. Yet, despite such advancements, Black women in the DEI&J sphere continue to face significant challenges that impede their progression to upper leadership roles, often resulting in feelings of being overstretched and diminishing their efficiency and enthusiasm for their roles. Specifically, Black women DEI&J professionals in academia confront barriers that may discourage them from continuing in the field. These challenges include a lack of meaningful institutional support, experiences of tokenism, professional exhaustion, and being underappreciated. Moreover, those who remain in the field frequently encounter obstacles such as a lack of cross-institutional support networks, which restricts their professional development, a deficiency of authoritative power to drive substantial change, or access to mentorship opportunities. This chapter delves into the study conducted on these issues, offering a synthesis of the research findings and conclusions concerning four central research questions. It also outlines suggestions for further investigation into effective strategies for recruiting and maintaining Black women DEI&J professionals in higher education environments.

**Summary of the Study**

This study, grounded in qualitative phenomenology, aimed to deeply understand the adversities faced by Black women engaged in the realm of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice within the academic sector. It sought to uncover the tactics these professionals utilize to

mitigate feelings of being tokenized, weary, and underappreciated. Concentrating on the real-world experiences of Black women holding leadership roles in diversity initiatives, the research intended to pinpoint the distinct challenges they encounter and their approaches to overcoming these hurdles. The formulation of research and interview questions was preceded by a thorough examination of literature. This review spanned both historical and modern-day narratives concerning Black women in diversity roles, highlighting their dual marginalization due to race and gender, along with the unique difficulties they face within the context of higher education. Additionally, the literature review was instrumental in delineating key themes such as tokenism, exhaustion, and perceptions of being undervalued, which subsequently informed the direction of data gathering and analytical efforts.

This research entailed detailed interviews with 15 selected participants. The selection process was based on purposive sampling, leveraging LinkedIn profiles and the researcher's professional network to identify suitable candidates. An initial list of 50 potential participants was curated, from which 15 individuals were contacted via email and agreed to partake in the study. These interviews were conducted over Zoom, where participants responded to a series of 13 well-constructed questions. These questions underwent a thorough validation process, including assessments of face validity, peer review, and expert validation, under the guidance of the dissertation advisory committee. Consent was secured from all participants for the recording of their interviews, which were then transcribed using advanced transcription software.

The analysis of the interview transcripts involved a detailed examination to detect key terms, significant expressions, and patterns that provided insight into the experiences of Black women DEI&J practitioners. The objective was to identify common themes and strategies used by these professionals to navigate their challenges. The study's integrity and the veracity of its

findings were bolstered by an inter-rater review, involving a group of peers who reviewed and reached a consensus on the thematic interpretations, thereby enhancing the study's trustworthiness. Themes extracted from the analysis were correlated with each interview and research question, with the findings visually represented through frequency bar charts for clearer theme distribution visualization. This research not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on the subject but also aims to offer actionable insights for higher education institutions. By framing the experiences of Black women diversity practitioners against the backdrop of recent societal challenges—including the pandemic, racial tensions, and political divisions—the study proposes ways for institutions to cultivate environments that support the advancement and well-being of these critical staff members, thereby promoting a more equitable and inclusive academic community.

**Discussion of Findings**

The main goal of this research was to uncover the effective practices and approaches Black women in diversity roles use to navigate the obstacles they face in higher education settings. This section delves into the findings and the researcher's interpretations. The hope is that the insights gleaned from this study will enrich the scholarly dialogue surrounding these issues and shed light on ways to alleviate experiences of tokenism, burnout, and devaluation. Drawing from the narratives shared by the participants, this investigation has charted their experiences and the tactics they employ to adeptly manage and counter these challenges. From these insights, a framework has been crafted to highlight best practices and address the unique requirements of Black women diversity practitioners, aiming to enhance their efficacy and impact within the academic sphere.

**Results**

*Results for Research Question 1*

      The first research question asked about the challenges Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education. Within the realm of higher education institutions, Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners encounter a spectrum of challenges that shape their professional experiences. The initial theme illuminates the disconcerting disconnect between professed institutional support for DEI&J principles and the tangible reality of dismissive actions, indicating a pervasive trend of superficial commitment. Further exploration delves into the interconnected dynamics of burnout and intersecting identities, unraveling the nuanced stressors faced by Black women practitioners. The synthesis also underscores the recurrent struggle against a lack of authority, emphasizing the crucial skill of managing upward to navigate intricate power dynamics. A delicate balance surfaces in the discourse, summarizing the constant negotiation of balance between enduring microaggressions and tokenism. After examining the narratives that correlate to RQ 1, the toll on practitioners' well-being becomes evident, magnified by the cultural discomfort within institutional spaces. This synthesis provides a lens through which to examine the multifaceted challenges encountered by Black women DEI&J practitioners.

*Discussion of Research Question 1*

      The findings from this study shed light on the challenges faced by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners within institutions of higher education. The identified themes — Superficial Support, Dismissive Actions, Burnout, Intersecting Identities, Lack of Authority, Lack of Reciprocal Growth, Microaggressions and Tokenism, Black Fatigue, Balancing Passion and Well-being, Cultural Discomfort, and

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Institutional Disconnect — underscore the systemic barriers and inequities that these practitioners encounter in their roles. One prominent challenge highlighted by the participants is the experience of superficial support. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of genuine commitment and investment in DEI&J initiatives, as institutions often prioritize appearances and symbolic gestures over substantive change. This aligns with existing literature that points to the prevalence of performative diversity efforts that fail to address systemic issues (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Dismissive actions by leadership, staff, and students emerged as another significant challenge faced by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants shared instances of being disregarded, devalued, and not being taken seriously in their roles. This reflects the persistence of racial and gender biases within educational institutions, where Black women may encounter skepticism or resistance when advocating for equitable practices (Verjee, 2013).

Burnout was identified as a prevalent challenge experienced by Black women DEI&J practitioners. The demanding nature of their work, coupled with the emotional toll of confronting systemic inequities, can contribute to mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. This finding aligns with research that highlights the high levels of stress and burnout among professionals working in DEI&J fields (Verjee, 2013). The intersectionality of identities was identified as an additional challenge. Black women DEI&J practitioners often navigate multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, and often other marginalized identities. These intersecting identities can lead to unique experiences of discrimination and marginalization within the workplace. The participants' experiences reflect the need for a more inclusive approach that recognizes the complexity of identity and addresses the specific challenges faced by individuals with intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1999). Lack of authority emerged as a barrier faced by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants described instances where their expertise and

perspectives were disregarded or questioned, limiting their ability to effect change and influence

decision-making processes. This finding underscores the need for institutions to empower and

support DEI&J practitioners by granting them the authority necessary to enact meaningful

transformation (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Wallrich et al., 2022). Participants also

highlighted the lack of reciprocal growth within their institutions, where opportunities for

professional development and advancement were limited. This finding emphasizes the need for

institutions to prioritize the career progression and ongoing growth of Black women DEI&J

practitioners, ensuring that they are afforded equal opportunities for advancement and

recognition (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Microaggressions and tokenism were pervasive experiences described by the participants.

These acts of subtle discrimination and the reduction of individuals to tokens can create a hostile

work environment and contribute to a sense of exclusion and marginalization. The presence of

microaggressions and tokenism highlights the importance of creating inclusive and supportive

organizational cultures that actively challenge such behaviors (Holder et al., 2007). Participants

emphasized the importance of balancing passion for their work with prioritizing well-being. The

intense commitment to challenging inequities can sometimes come at the cost of self-care and

personal well-being. This finding highlights the need for organizations to prioritize the mental

and emotional well-being of DEI&J practitioners and provide resources and support systems to

sustain their resilience (Showunmi, 2023). Cultural discomfort and institutional disconnect were

additional challenges experienced by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants spoke of

feeling isolated and disconnected within predominantly white spaces and the lack of

communication and community within their institutions. This finding points to the importance of

creating inclusive and supportive organizational cultures that foster a sense of belonging and address the cultural dissonance experienced by marginalized individuals (Jackson et al., 2022).

*Summary of Research Question 1*

The findings from RQ1 shed light on the substantial challenges faced by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners within institutions of higher education. The study illuminated systematic barriers and daily inequities that these practitioners confront, contributing to a profound impact on their professional growth, job satisfaction, and overall sense of connection to their working environments. The themes that emerged underscored the prevalence of obstacles such as systemic barriers, biases, and a sense of isolation. These challenges not only hinder the effectiveness and well-being of Black women DEI&J practitioners but also underscore the urgent need for strategic interventions. Addressing these challenges requires implementing strategies that go beyond superficial support and token gestures. Genuine support, empowerment initiatives, cultural understanding, and prioritization of well-being are key components in fostering inclusive and equitable institutions. By systematically tackling these challenges, institutions can create environments where Black women DEI&J practitioners thrive, contributing their full potential to the realization of more equitable and inclusive higher education spaces.

*Results for Research Question 2*

The second research question focused on strategies Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges. When examining these strategies, the themes underscored resilience and empowerment. One crucial strategy centers on the creation of and reliance upon support groups, fostering a sense of community amid professional challenges. Leveraging experience emerges as a strategic pillar, emphasizing the

need to capitalize on accumulated knowledge to effect change. Resignation is another theme which acknowledges the strategic decision to disengage from unwinnable battles. The establishment and cultivation of networks are identified as instrumental for professional survival and advancement. The synthesis of feedback further underscores the need for inter-institutional support, advocating for collective action across academic spaces. Themes like self-awareness and growth mindset reveal the give and take of personal development and professional resilience. Managing resistance emerges as a strategic skill, complemented by goal-oriented approaches that challenge expectations. Communication becomes a strategic linchpin, serving as a channel for constituent needs, teaching moments, and persistent advocacy. The practitioners' strategic toolkit extends to empowered advocacy, embodying a commitment to community-oriented change. Coping mechanisms and gradual progression emerge as nuanced strategies, reflecting the adaptive nature of these professionals in their pursuit of equity and social justice within higher education.

*Discussion of Research Question 2*

The strategies identified by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners to overcome challenges in their roles within higher education institutions provide valuable insights into their experiences and the approaches they employ. The themes that emerged from the data include support groups, leveraging experience, resignation, the need for inter-institutional support, self-awareness, leveraging experience for respect, cultivating a growth mindset, managing resistance through resilience, challenging societal expectations, and the lessons learned while working in these roles, such as clear communication, using challenges as teaching moments, persistence, community-oriented practices, coping mechanisms, and gradual progression. Support groups were highlighted as an important strategy for Black women DEI&J

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practitioners in overcoming challenges. The participants emphasized the significance of finding a network of like-minded individuals who provide emotional support, share experiences, and offer guidance. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of supportive networks and communities in professional contexts (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). By engaging in support groups, practitioners can gain validation, exchange strategies, and find solace in navigating the unique challenges they face. Leveraging experience emerged as a crucial strategy employed by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants emphasized the value of drawing upon their past experiences and expertise to navigate challenges and drive change. This aligns with literature that recognizes the importance of leveraging experience and knowledge in DEI&J initiatives (Sandhu, 2017). By capitalizing on their experiences, practitioners can bring a nuanced perspective to their work and leverage their expertise to enact meaningful change.

Resignation was identified as a strategy employed by some Black women DEI&J practitioners. While it may seem counterintuitive, participants expressed instances where they had to make the difficult decision to leave an institution or role that did not adequately support their DEI&J efforts. This aligns with literature that acknowledges the challenges and limitations faced by practitioners in environments that resist change (Robinson, 2013). By resigning from unsupportive environments, practitioners can seek opportunities that align with their values and offer a greater potential for impact. The need for inter-institutional support emerged as an important strategy for Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants highlighted the significance of collaborating with external organizations, networks, and allies to foster change within their institutions. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the importance of partnerships and alliances in advancing DEI&J efforts (Mirza, 2014). By seeking inter-institutional support, practitioners can leverage collective resources, share best practices, and

advocate for systemic change. Self-awareness was emphasized as a crucial strategy for Black

women DEI&J practitioners. Participants highlighted the importance of understanding their own

identities, biases, and strengths in navigating the complex landscape of DEI&J work. This aligns

with existing literature that recognizes self-awareness as a foundational competency for DEI&J

practitioners (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). By cultivating self-awareness, practitioners can engage in

critical self-reflection, address their own biases, and approach their work with authenticity and

empathy. Leveraging experience for respect emerged as a valuable strategy employed by Black

women DEI&J practitioners. Participants emphasized the importance of using their knowledge

and expertise to gain respect and influence within their institutions. This aligns with literature

that recognizes the significance of expertise and credibility in enacting change (S. L. Harris,

2011). By leveraging their experience, practitioners can establish themselves as trusted and

credible voices in the DEI&J field, thereby increasing their influence and impact.

Cultivating a growth mindset was identified as a strategy used by Black women DEI&J

practitioners to manage challenges. Participants emphasized the importance of embracing a

belief in personal and institutional growth and learning from setbacks. This aligns with literature

that emphasizes the role of a growth mindset in driving innovation and resilience (Dweck, 2006).

By adopting a growth mindset, practitioners can view challenges as opportunities for learning,

adaptability, and continuous improvement. Managing resistance through resilience was

highlighted as a critical strategy employed by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants

acknowledged the presence of resistance to DEI&J initiatives and emphasized the importance of

developing resilience to persist in the face of obstacles. This aligns with literature that recognizes

the role of resilience in navigating challenging environments (Showunmi, 2023). By developing

resilience, practitioners can withstand adversity, maintain their commitment to DEI&J work, and

continue driving change despite resistance. Challenging societal expectations emerged as an important strategy employed by Black women DEI&J practitioners. Participants emphasized the need to question and challenge prevailing norms and expectations that perpetuate inequities. This aligns with literature that recognizes the transformative potential of challenging societal norms and structures (McCray, 2011). By challenging societal expectations, practitioners can disrupt oppressive systems, advocate for inclusive practices, and pave the way for transformative change.

The lessons learned by Black women DEI&J practitioners while working in higher education institutions provide valuable insights for emerging and current practitioners. Clear communication was identified as a crucial lesson, emphasizing the importance of effectively articulating DEI&J goals, strategies, and outcomes. Using challenges as teaching moments was highlighted as a valuable approach to foster learning and growth within the institution and promote dialogue around DEI&J issues. Persistence emerged as a key lesson, emphasizing the need to remain committed and resilient in the face of obstacles. Community-oriented practices were highlighted as instrumental in building supportive networks, fostering collaboration, and promoting a sense of belonging. Coping mechanisms were identified as important strategies to navigate the emotional toll of DEI&J work and maintain well-being. Gradual progression was emphasized, indicating that sustainable change requires patience, persistence, and a long-term perspective.

*Summary of Research Question 2*

The findings revealed that Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners employ a range of strategies to overcome the challenges they face within higher education institutions. A significant focus emerged on seeking emotional support and guidance

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from like-minded individuals, acknowledging the potential need to explore opportunities elsewhere to effectively perform diversity work. The adoption of a resilient mindset, continuous learning, and the disruption of norms perpetuating inequities were identified as key strategies. The discussion around these strategies led to a discourse on valuable lessons learned, emphasizing the importance of clear communication, community-oriented practices for collaborative experiences, and understanding that sustainable change demands patience and consistent effort. The employed strategies, including support groups, leveraging experience, resignation, inter-institutional support, self-awareness, cultivating a growth mindset, managing resistance through resilience, and challenging societal expectations, provide crucial insights. These insights, along with the lessons learned, offer guidance for both practitioners and institutions committed to fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. The incorporation of these strategies and lessons equips practitioners to navigate challenges, drive meaningful change, and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable higher education environments.

### *Results for Research Question 3*

The third research question examined how Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success. The themes revealed illuminate their criteria for achievement. This assessment given by the participants is developed from the theme of feedback, emphasizing the iterative nature of success assessment and the importance of responsive strategies. Policy shifts emerge as a pivotal marker of success, signifying tangible institutional changes that align with DEI&J goals. Increased access stands out as a theme, defining success as expanding opportunities and dismantling barriers. The utilization of data as a metric underscores a commitment to evidence-based practice, providing an objective foundation

for success evaluation. Here trust becomes a cornerstone theme, signifying success in building

credible, reciprocal relationships. The theme of resonance and agreement highlights the

importance of collective acknowledgment and alignment of values. Opportunities for growth

emerge as a dynamic aspect of success measurement, emphasizing the continual pursuit of

improvement. This synthesis encapsulates the diverse ways in which Black women DEI&J

practitioners define, track, and measure success, reflecting a comprehensive and nuanced

understanding of success within the higher education landscape.

*Discussion of Research Question 3*

The findings of this study shed light on how Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion,

and Social Justice practitioners track, measure, and define success within higher education

institutions. The themes that emerged from the data include giving and receiving feedback,

sustainable and effective policy shifts, increased access to learning opportunities, the use of

qualitative and quantitative data, building and maintaining trust, and opportunities for growth.

The theme of giving and receiving feedback highlights the importance of ongoing dialogue and

communication in assessing the effectiveness of DEI&J efforts. Black women practitioners

recognize the value of feedback from various stakeholders, including students, colleagues, and

institutional leaders. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the significance of feedback in

shaping and improving DEI&J initiatives (Hurtado et al., 1999). By actively seeking feedback

and engaging in reflective practice, practitioners can make informed decisions and continuously

refine their strategies. Sustainable and effective policy shifts emerged as a critical aspect of

success for Black women DEI&J practitioners. These practitioners recognize the need for

institutional policies and practices that address systemic inequities and promote inclusivity. This

aligns with the existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of policy changes to create

lasting and transformative impacts (D. G. Smith, 2020). By advocating for policy shifts, practitioners can contribute to institutional change that fosters a more equitable and inclusive environment.

Increased access to learning opportunities emerged as a key measure of success for Black women DEI&J practitioners, both for themselves and for students. These practitioners recognize the value of continuous learning and professional development in advancing DEI&J goals. The literature supports the idea that ongoing education and skill-building are essential for addressing complex issues of diversity and inclusion (J. C. Harris & Patton, 2019). By prioritizing access to learning opportunities, practitioners can enhance their own knowledge and skills while empowering students to critically engage with DEI&J issues. The use of qualitative and quantitative data emerged as an important strategy for tracking and measuring success. Black women DEI&J practitioners recognize the value of data in informing decision-making and demonstrating the impact of their work. This aligns with literature that highlights the significance of data-driven approaches in DEI&J efforts (Hurtado et al., 1999). By collecting and analyzing data, practitioners can assess the effectiveness of their initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and communicate their impact to stakeholders. Building and maintaining trust emerged as a crucial element of success for Black women DEI&J practitioners. Trust is essential for fostering meaningful relationships, collaboration, and engagement with stakeholders. This finding aligns with literature that emphasizes the importance of trust in DEI&J work (April, 2021; Evee, 2022). By establishing trust, practitioners can create a supportive and inclusive environment where diverse perspectives are valued and respected. Finally, opportunities for growth were identified as an important aspect of success for Black women DEI&J practitioners. These practitioners recognize the need for personal and professional development, as well as avenues for

advancement within their careers. The literature supports the idea that growth opportunities contribute to job satisfaction and long-term engagement in DEI&J work (Kendi, 2020). By seeking out and creating opportunities for growth, practitioners can continue to make meaningful contributions and drive positive change.

*Summary of Research Question 3*

The identified themes underscored the significance of valuing opportunities for personal and professional growth and emphasized the importance of fostering trust to enhance collaboration with stakeholders. The findings revealed that these practitioners actively advocate for others and strive to effect sustainable change within their higher education institutions. Key themes identified include the importance of giving and receiving feedback, the necessity for sustainable and effective policy shifts, the pursuit of increased access to learning opportunities, and the utilization of both qualitative and quantitative data to showcase the impact of their work. Additionally, the themes of building and maintaining trust and creating avenues for continuous growth emerged as central components in their definitions of success. These nuanced insights contribute significantly to the existing literature, offering firsthand perspectives on how Black women DEI&J practitioners navigate and define success within their roles. Understanding these strategies provides a foundation for the development of targeted support systems and resources, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment.

*Results for Research Question 4*

The fourth research question centered around the recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field. Central to these recommendations is the recognition of personal sacrifice, emphasizing the importance of establishing boundaries and avoiding excessive self-exertion for the sake of

professional success. A resounding theme is the crucial need for leaders in this field to speak up, emphasizing the power of advocacy in confronting issues of inequity and injustice. Overcompensation emerges as a cautionary theme, urging emerging leaders to resist the pressure to overextend themselves to compensate for systemic gaps. Continuous learning is underscored as a recommendation, urging emerging diversity leaders to stay conscious of evolving research, trends, and best practices in DEI&J. Prioritizing well-being is positioned as a non-negotiable, stressing the vital role of self-care in sustaining long-term engagement. The significance of having a vocal champion is emphasized, highlighting the influential role of allies in amplifying the voices of emerging DEI&J leaders. Embracing mistakes is positioned as an instrumental recommendation, aligning with a growth mindset and resilience as catalysts for innovation. Celebrating achievements becomes a recurring theme, emphasizing the value of acknowledgment and positive reinforcement. Strategic thinking and planning are underscored, stressing the need for intentional approaches aligned with organizational goals.

*Discussion of Research Question 4*

The recommendations provided by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (DEI&J) practitioners for emerging leaders in the field offer valuable insights into the strategies and approaches that can contribute to their success. The themes that emerged from the data include embracing mistakes, strategic thinking and planning, finding a vocal champion, prioritizing well-being, celebrating achievements, continuous learning, avoiding personal sacrifice and overcompensation, and speaking up sooner and more often. Embracing mistakes emerged as an important recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners highlight the value of learning from mistakes and using them as opportunities for growth and improvement. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes

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the importance of a growth mindset and resilience in navigating challenges (Dweck, 2006). By embracing mistakes, emerging leaders can foster a culture of learning and innovation within their organizations. Strategic thinking and planning were identified as critical skills for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners emphasize the need for strategic approaches that align with organizational goals and promote long-term impact. This aligns with literature that highlights the significance of strategic planning in DEI&J initiatives (Lanier et al., 2022). By thinking strategically and developing comprehensive plans, emerging leaders can effectively address systemic inequities and drive sustainable change.

Finding a vocal champion emerged as a valuable recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners stress the importance of having influential allies who can advocate for their work and amplify their voices. This aligns with existing literature that recognizes the role of allies and sponsors in supporting underrepresented individuals in professional settings (Hunt et al., 2018). By finding a vocal champion, emerging leaders can gain visibility, access resources, and navigate barriers more effectively. Prioritizing well-being was highlighted as a crucial recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners emphasize the need to prioritize self-care and establish boundaries to prevent burnout. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the importance of well-being in sustaining long-term engagement in DEI&J work (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). By prioritizing well-being, emerging leaders can maintain their resilience and effectiveness in driving change. Celebrating achievements emerged as an important recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners emphasize the need to recognize and celebrate milestones and successes along the journey. This aligns with literature that highlights the importance of acknowledging progress and fostering a positive work environment (Chang et al,

2019; T. B. Jones & Wilder, 2013). By celebrating achievements, emerging leaders can boost morale, inspire their teams, and foster a culture of appreciation. Continuous learning was identified as a crucial recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners stress the importance of staying updated on research, trends, and best practices in DEI&J.

This aligns with literature that emphasizes the significance of ongoing learning and professional development in the field (Showunmi, 2023). By engaging in continuous learning, emerging leaders can enhance their knowledge, skills, and ability to address complex DEI&J challenges. Avoiding personal sacrifice and overcompensation emerged as a key recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners emphasize the importance of setting boundaries and avoiding the pressure to sacrifice their personal well-being in the pursuit of success. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the need for work-life balance and self-care practices (Jacobs, 2013). By prioritizing their well-being, emerging leaders can sustain their passion and effectiveness in their roles. Speaking up sooner and more often was identified as an essential recommendation for emerging leaders in the DEI&J field. Black women practitioners stress the importance of using their voices to advocate for themselves and address issues of inequity and injustice. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the significance of speaking up and challenging the status quo (Mirza, 2014). By speaking up sooner and more often, emerging leaders can contribute to creating inclusive and equitable environments.

*Summary of Research Question 4*

The recommendations provided by Black women DEI&J practitioners for emerging leaders in the field highlight important strategies and approaches for success. The focus of these recommendations centered around the theme of self-care and self-love. Participants emphasized

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the importance of acknowledging their own abilities early in their careers, rather than waiting, to maximize effectiveness and avoid harmful work conditions. Key recommendations included embracing mistakes, strategic thinking and planning, finding a vocal champion, prioritizing well-being, celebrating achievements, continuous learning, and avoiding personal sacrifice and overcompensation. Additionally, participants stressed the significance of speaking up sooner and more frequently. These recommendations collectively serve as a guide for emerging leaders to navigate the challenges within the DEI&J field and contribute to fostering meaningful change within their organizations and broader communities. By adopting these strategies, emerging leaders can play a pivotal role in building more inclusive and equitable higher education institutions.

**Implications of the Study**

The aim of this study was to identify and examine the best practices and strategies utilized by Black women diversity practitioners to address feelings of tokenism, fatigue, and undervaluation. The implications drawn from this study have significant ramifications for both higher education institutions and Black women diversity practitioners, extending into broader societal contexts. The identified best practices and strategies highlight the need for a fundamental culture shift within higher education institutions, emphasizing the creation of equitable and inclusive environments. The study suggests that this shift is vital not only for recruiting but, more crucially, for retaining Black women diversity professionals. The findings underscore the pivotal role of strong leadership in driving organizational change and fostering inclusive cultures (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Academic institutions with diversity-related departments can utilize the results such as, embracing feedback and learning from mistakes, as an opportunity to develop

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with a growth mindset which is often associated with fostering innovation and overcoming

challenges in the workplace (Showunmi, 2023) which may ultimately enhance their campuses.

The need for culture shifts is twofold: first, within the internal dynamics of higher

education institutions and, second, in the way professional development is conceptualized

(Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). The study underscores the urgency of establishing a supportive culture

that addresses tokenism, fatigue, and undervaluation. It advocates for cultural changes in hiring

processes, support systems, and leadership structures. This internal shift is essential for creating

environments where Black women diversity professionals not only survive but thrive.

Furthermore, the study promotes professional development as a key element. It emphasizes the

crafting of networking and mentorship opportunities tailored to the unique needs of Black

women practitioners (Nickerson-Guidry, 2021; Sobers, 2014; Wright et al., 2019). The findings

suggest that such opportunities can serve as safe spaces for recharging and continuous

professional development. This recommendation aligns with the broader understanding that

professional development is not only about skill enhancement but also about creating an

ecosystem where practitioners can connect, share experiences, and derive support. Moreover, the

study positions professional development as a catalyst for broader industry engagement.

Encouraging these professionals to join organizations and engage with external resources fosters

a robust network that not only supports their individual growth but also introduces fresh

perspectives and practices to their institutions. This emphasis on external engagement is a

strategic move to avoid professional isolation and enhance the resilience of these practitioners.

In conclusion, the implications of this study call for a reevaluation of the organizational

culture within higher education institutions and a reimagining of professional development

frameworks. The proposed culture shifts aim to create environments where Black women

diversity professionals feel valued and supported, thereby promoting their retention (Frierson, 2011). Simultaneously, the recommended professional development strategies are envisioned not only as tools for individual growth but as vehicles for broader industry connectivity and innovation. The study lays the groundwork for immediate actionable steps to effect change within higher education institutions, addressing the urgent need for cultural and professional shifts (Crenshaw, 1989; Nardon et al., 2011).

**The C.A.R.E.S. for Black Women Diversity Practitioners**

The C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity Practitioners is a model the researcher created based on the findings of this study (see Figure 14). This model is presented as a multifaceted strategy designed to respond to the challenges experienced by Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners in higher education. The metaphorical representation of the model as a "5-strand braid" accentuates the intricate interdependence of its components, emphasizing their collective significance. This unique model has been strategically crafted to address a pervasive sentiment among participants and within existing literature — a sense of institutional indifference and neglect towards DEI&J practitioners. Rather than contesting institutional power directly, the model is conceived as a practical tool to be wielded by individual practitioners within their own practice. The envisioned application extends beyond theory, aiming to empower professionals through tailored training within professional organizations and the establishment of support groups grounded in the model. This approach seeks to mitigate the prevalent issues of isolation and burnout by fostering communities of practice. Notably, the model responds to the contemporary challenge of institutions creating DEI&J roles without adequate infrastructure, offering practitioners a strategic infrastructure of their own to navigate and influence the systems they engage with.

Thus, the C.A.R.E.S. Model emerges not just as a theoretical construct but as a tangible and adaptable resource for practitioners, providing a collaborative and holistic approach to DEI&J work within diverse organizational settings.

The primary audience for the C.A.R.E.S. Model is Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice practitioners in higher education. The model is specifically tailored to address the unique challenges faced by this demographic within academic institutions. However, its applicability is not confined to higher education, making it relevant for Black women diversity professionals across various organizational settings, including the private sector. Secondary audiences include university administrators, diversity and inclusion officers, human resources professionals, and other individuals responsible for implementing DEI&J initiatives within institutions. Moreover, professional organizations seeking to enhance support structures for their members, particularly those focusing on DEI&J practitioners, constitute an additional audience. The model is positioned as a practical and user-centric tool, aiming to empower individuals to navigate and catalyze change within their respective environments. The application of the C.A.R.E.S. model involves implementing the following elements:

- Understanding the institution's goals, challenges, and current diversity practices
- Introducing the C.A.R.E.S. model to stakeholders, explaining its components and how it addresses the unique experiences of Black women diversity professionals
- Raising awareness and educating participants about the experiences, challenges, and contributions of Black women diversity professionals. This includes exploring topics such as intersectionality, racial and gender bias, systemic racism, and the impact of these factors on the workplace

- Incorporate case studies and scenarios that highlight the experiences of Black women diversity professionals in higher education

- Provide participants with specific skills and strategies for creating an inclusive and supportive environment for Black women diversity professionals. This can include communication techniques, conflict resolution strategies, allyship development, and ways to address microaggressions and unconscious bias

- Engage stakeholders in interactive exercises and discussions to encourage active learning and reflection. These exercises can involve group activities, role-playing, and facilitated dialogues that allow participants to explore their own biases, assumptions, and actions

- Facilitate the development of action plans by participants to apply the knowledge and skills gained from the training in their respective roles within the institution. This can include setting goals, identifying specific actions, and establishing accountability measures

**Figure 14**

*The C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity*



## The C.A.R.E.S. for Black Women Diversity Practitioners

**C** Cultivating Equitable and Inclusive Environments

**A** Amplifying Voices and Advancement Opportunities

**R** Resourceful Support Networks and Mentorship

**E** Embracing Feedback and Learning from Mistakes

**S** Strengthening Leadership and Policy Shifts

**Cultivating Equitable and Inclusive Environments:** Fostering a work culture that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring Black women diversity practitioners feel valued and supported.

**Amplifying Voices and Advancement Opportunities:** Providing speaking and presentation opportunities for Black women diversity practitioners to share their expertise, perspectives, and achievements, enabling professional growth and visibility.

**Resourceful Support Networks and Mentorship:** Establishing support groups and networks of other Black women diversity professionals, promoting collaboration, mentorship, and knowledge sharing for personal and professional development.

**Embracing Feedback and Learning from Mistakes:** Creating a culture where feedback is valued, mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth, and continuous learning is encouraged for individual and organizational improvement.

**Strengthening Leadership and Policy Shifts:** Addressing dismissive actions from leadership, advocating for Black women diversity practitioners to assert themselves, and implementing sustainable policy changes to foster an inclusive and justice-centered work environment.

*Note.* The C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity Practitioners displays Cultivating Equitable and Inclusive Environments, Amplifying Voices and Advancement Opportunities, Resourceful Support Networks and Mentorship, Embracing Feedback and Learning from Mistakes, Strengthening Leadership and Policy Shifts as individual supports Black Women Diversity Practitioners require of their organization, with each step needing to be weaved together, to result in a sustainable working environment for Black women diversity practitioners and lead to positive personal and professional outcomes.

The five steps included in The C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity practitioners are as follows:

1. C – Cultivating Equitable and Inclusive Environments: In this initial step, institutions must prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion by fostering a work culture where Black women diversity practitioners feel valued and supported. This involves promoting open and clear communication, valuing feedback, and acknowledging the intersectional experiences and unique challenges faced by Black women diversity professionals. Additionally, creating a culture that embraces mistakes as learning opportunities and values teaching moments is crucial.

2. A – Amplifying Voices and Advancement Opportunities: The second step is to emphasize the importance of providing speaking and presentation opportunities to Black women diversity practitioners, allowing them to showcase their expertise, perspectives, and achievements for professional growth and visibility. Additionally, it highlights the need for continuous professional development and learning opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge both within and outside of the workplace.

3. R – Resourceful Support Networks and Mentorship: The third step is to establish support networks among Black women diversity professionals to foster a sense of community and empowerment, promoting collaboration, mentorship, and knowledge sharing for personal and professional development. It also emphasizes the importance of prioritizing self-awareness and well-being by providing resources and support for mental and emotional health.

4. E – Embracing Feedback and Learning from Mistakes: The fourth step is to foster a culture that values feedback, embraces mistakes as growth opportunities, and encourages continuous learning for individual and organizational improvement. This involves promoting mutual growth between the institution and Black women diversity professionals by recognizing and supporting their personal and professional development.

5. S – Strengthening Leadership and Policy Shifts – The fifth and final step is to acknowledge that in order to cultivate a more equitable, inclusive, and justice-centered space for Black women diversity professionals, institutions should take the following steps: address dismissive actions, encourage assertiveness, and implement sustainable policies; proactively respond to incidents of racism and tokenism; use qualitative and quantitative data for informed decision-making; and identify and support vocal champions who advocate for the contributions and well-being of Black women diversity professionals.

The purpose of these five steps is to act as a cohesive framework for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion while supporting the well-being and professional growth of Black women DEI&J practitioners. The ultimate goal is to cultivate a more equitable, inclusive, and justice-centered environment, mitigate feelings of tokenism, fatigue, and undervaluation, and promote the retention of Black women DEI&J professionals in the field. The C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity Practitioners was created to guide higher education institutions in better supporting Black women DEI&J practitioners, promoting their retention, and ensuring a more equitable and inclusive space. The model is a holistic and adaptable framework that can be implemented across various organizational contexts to drive positive change.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study will add to the scarce literature in this area, give voice to the challenges Black women diversity professionals face as double minorities in terms of race and gender (D.L. Cook, 2012; M.C. Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Nixon, 2013), evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to positive personal and professional outcomes and offer information for institutions to be reflective of the culture and practices of their organizations that directly impact Black women diversity practitioners. Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be made for future studies in the field of Black women diversity professionals in higher education. These recommendations aim to address the challenges Black women in academia face in terms of race and gender, and to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment. Along the same vein of cultivating an inclusive and safe work environment, further research is needed to explore strategies for creating an equitable work environment that values the contributions of Black women diversity professionals. This includes examining organizational policies, practices, and culture to identify barriers and implementing interventions to promote diversity, inclusion, and justice. Another recommendation for further research is to investigate ways to amplify the voices of Black women diversity professionals within higher education institutions. This includes examining power dynamics, representation, and decision-making processes to ensure that their perspectives and experiences are heard and valued.

In addition, it is recommended that researchers consider exploring opportunities for reciprocal growth and development for Black women diversity professionals. This can include mentorship programs, leadership training, and professional development initiatives that specifically address the unique needs and aspirations of this group. Additionally, research can be

conducted on the impact of sustainable policy shifts on the retention and well-being of Black women diversity professionals. This can include examining the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion policies, evaluating the role of institutional leadership in driving change, and identifying best practices for creating lasting structural transformations. Finally, future researchers may consider investigating how the customization and adaptation of the C.A.R.E.S. Model for Black Women Diversity Practitioners to meet the specific needs and challenges faced by Black women diversity professionals in different institutional contexts. This may involve exploring how the model can be modified to address intersectionality, geographical variations, or organizational factors that influence the experiences of Black women in higher education.

Further, a study can focus on the implementation and evaluation of the C.A.R.E.S. model in higher education institutions by studying the factors that facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of the model, as well as examining its long-term effectiveness in promoting the well-being and retention of Black women diversity professionals. Failure to prioritize these recommendations and create a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment for Black women diversity professionals will continue to contribute to high attrition rates within the field. It is essential for higher education institutions to heed the insights provided by Black women themselves and take proactive steps to address the challenges they face. By doing so, institutions can ensure the success and well-being of Black women diversity practitioners and work towards creating more equitable and just higher education environments.

**Study Conclusion**

Women encounter numerous barriers and obstacles that impede their progression into higher leadership positions, resulting in feelings of being overworked and hindering their ability to perform effectively. Black women diversity professionals, in particular, face additional

challenges due to working in predominantly white institutions with a history of inclusion and

discrimination against Black women. This study aimed to identify best practices and strategies

employed by Black women diversity professionals to overcome the experience of tokenism,

fatigue, and undervaluation. Through this study, the researcher's findings demonstrate that Black

women diversity professionals can effectively address their feelings of tokenism, fatigue, and

undervaluation by employing specific tools and strategies. These include fostering an equitable

work environment, amplifying their voices, cultivating reciprocal growth opportunities, and

implementing sustainable policy shifts. Failure to create a safe, inclusive, and respectful

environment for Black women in their roles as diversity professionals will continue to contribute

to high attrition rates within the field. Therefore, the findings of this study serve as a call to

action for higher education institutions seeking to hire Black women diversity practitioners. By

heeding the insights provided by Black women themselves, institutions can gain a deeper

understanding of the support and resources needed for these professionals to succeed in

achieving their career goals while maintaining strong emotional, mental, and physical well-

being.

**Final Thoughts**

As an educator and emerging diversity practitioner, I am grateful for the opportunity to

listen to and share the stories of Black women diversity practitioners in higher education. This

research has shed light on the challenging experiences they face, but it has also highlighted the

potential for positive change within higher education institutions. It is crucial that institutions are

prepared to value and support the expertise of individuals they recruit, ensuring they have the

necessary resources and a conducive environment to make a lasting impact and affirm their

experiences. By adopting the C.A.R.E.S. Model higher education institutions can transform their

practices, climate, and communication related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice initiatives. These changes will not only benefit diversity practitioners but also positively impact the student body, staff, faculty, administrators, and the wider community. Implementing these practices will lead to higher retention rates, improved personal and professional outcomes for Black women diversity professionals, and demonstrate a genuine commitment to caring for and valuing the contributions of Black women in these spaces. Ultimately, this shift reflects the understanding that change can occur with or without their presence, but it must never come at the expense of their well-being.

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# APPENDIX A

## Pepperdine University IRB Approval

## NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: April 19, 2023

Protocol Investigator Name: Brittney Johnson

Protocol #: 22-09-1938

Project Title: Best Practices for Black Women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice Practitioners in Higher Education

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Brittney Johnson:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

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Informed Consent Form

**IRB #: 22-09-1938**
**Formal Study Title: Best Practices for Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice Practitioners**

**Authorized Study Personnel:**

Principal Investigator: Brittney Johnson

**Key Information:**

**If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:**

- ☑ (Males and Females) between the ages of (18-80)
- ☑ Procedures will include (Contacting participants using the recruitment script, informed consent, data collection via structured interview, transcription of data, analysis of data, documentation of findings)
- ☑ One virtual visit is required
- ☑ This visit will take 60 minutes total
- ☑ There is minimal risk associated with this study
- ☑ You will not be paid any amount of money for your participation
- ☑ You will be provided a copy of this consent form

**Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a leader in the diversity, equity and inclusion industry. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

The purpose of this research study is to center Black women's experiences, after the social unrest and political turmoil, at higher education institutions to examine further how these experiences affected their desire and ability to perform their jobs effectively.

Over the past three years Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice (DEI&J) practitioners have expressed feeling an overwhelming burden due in part to their work status, from being representative of their race at work to their constant need to code switch and show their values, lest they

be seen as strictly a diversity hire which has ultimately had a negative impact on their ability and/or desire to work in these roles.

It is hypothesized that this delicate balance between work and societal expectations leaves these Black women exhausted and trapped between two choices: stay and endure discrimination or leave the institution or field of academia altogether.

The objective of this research study is to examine the roles of these practitioners, assuming that colleges and universities want their diversity efforts to be successful and want to recruit and retain qualified and effective diversity practitioners. Additionally, the researcher desires to explore why this community of practitioners want/have left their position within the past three years — if it is due to career advancement, higher pay, seeking a more supportive climate, avoiding burnout, overseeing integration of marginalized perspectives – often including their own – and/or shifting organizational climate but perhaps lacking the influence or resources to do so, or a host of other reasons.

This research study will add to the scarce literature in this area, give voice to the advantages, successes, and challenges Black women face as double minorities in terms of race and gender, and offer information for institutions to be reflective of the culture and practices of their organizations that directly impact Black women diversity practitioners.

Additionally, this work will contextualize the issues of emotional and cognitive labor during the COVID-19 pandemic, racial upheaval, and political polarization of 2020 and offer strategies on ways higher education institutions can better prepare working environments to retain Black women diversity practitioners – prior to their hire – by cultivating a more equitable, inclusive and justice-centered spaces that is sustainable for them to continue to work in this field.

**What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to complete a 60-minute semi structured virtual interview via Zoom which will be audio recorded using Otter.ai. The PI will ask you a series of questions aimed at figuring out what strategies are used by leaders in your field. While the research will take approximately 26 to 52 weeks, your interview will only take 60 minutes.

**How will my data be used?**

Your interview responses will be transcribed, analyzed, and aggregated in order to determine the findings to the established research questions. All recordings will be disposed of immediately after the transcription process.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research presents minimal risk of loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the interview involves questions about your leadership practices. You may also experience fatigue, boredom, or anxiety as a result. Should the participant feel any of these feelings, they are welcome to pause or stop altogether.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

**What are the possible benefits to other people?**

The benefits to society may include better understanding of leadership strategies used within your industry. Other emerging leaders might also benefit from any additional recommendations that are shared through this process.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. There are no alternatives to participating, other than deciding to not participate.

**What will participating in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact the Principal Investigator listed at the beginning of this consent form, via email or phone.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be deidentified and stored electronically on a password-protected computer at the Principal Investigators house, locked in a personal desk and will only be seen by the researcher during and until the study is complete.

The interview session will be conducted via the researcher's Pepperdine Zoom account. In order to ensure participants are unidentified, virtual interviews will be conducted via Zoom, and interviews will be recorded via audio. The researcher will use Otter.ai to transcribe recordings. The audio files will be stored on a password-protected desktop computer until transcription is complete and then recordings will be permanently deleted.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

*For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.*

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):
Phone: 1(310)568-2305
Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study, (5) consent to be audio recorded. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Participant Name:**

(First, Last: Please Print)

**Participant Signature:**

Signature                                                        Date

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Form

Dear [Name],

My name is Brittney Johnson, and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a qualitative research study examining Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice practitioners in higher education institutions and you are invited to participate in the study.

If you agree, you are invited to participate in a zoom interview to discuss the culture and practices of your institution and its effect on your desire and ability to perform your job effectively.  The audio recorded interview is anticipated to take no more than an hour. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. Confidentiality will be maintained using a series of security measures, including password protected email communication using university firewall protections, a password protected zoom meeting, deidentification of data using pseudonyms as well as compartmentalization of the various data elements, keeping all information separate. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me.

Thank you for your participation,

Brittney Johnson
Pepperdine University | Graduate School of Education and Psychology
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Script: Social Media Post

As a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University, am conducting a research study that seeks to identify the best practices of Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners in higher education and the challenges they may have encountered following the increased demand of DEI&J roles in 2020.

If you have a minimum of three years of DEI&J experience, work or have previously worked at a higher education institution in a DEI&J role and would be willing to participate in an interview on your experiences, please email or message me on LinkedIn for more information.

Your participation in the study would consist of an audio-recorded Zoom interview and is anticipated to take no more than 30-60 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. Strict confidentiality procedures will be in place. Confidentiality will be maintained using a password-protected laptop and secure safe to store all data collected, including informed consent, the recorded interview, and the transcribed data. All data will also be de-identified using a numerical pseudonym which will be assigned to each individual recording.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Brittney Johnson

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

Icebreaker: Tell me a little bit about your career.

IQ1: Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore." Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected.

IQ2: How did you deal with this challenge?

IQ3: What did you learn?

IQ4: Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you.

- Follow-Up: What were those challenges?

IQ5: How did you deal with this challenge?

IQ6: What did you learn?

IQ7: What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J

practitioner? IQ 8: How did you deal with this challenge?

IQ9: What did you learn?

IQ10: How would you define success for you as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

IQ11: How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?

IQ12: If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be?

IQ13: What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve success?

APPENDIX F

Peer Review Form

**Interview Question Validity Feedback**

Thank you for your assistance in refining my interview questions.

The purpose of the table presented below is to ensure that my research questions for the study are adequately addressed with corresponding interview questions.

Please review each research question and its corresponding interview questions in the table below. Evaluate how well each interview question addresses the research question. If the interview question is directly relevant to the research question, please indicate "Keep as is." If the interview question is irrelevant to the research question, please mark it as "Delete." If the interview question can be modified to better align with the research question, please suggest the modifications in the provided space. Feel free to recommend any additional interview questions you deem necessary.

Each section of this document focuses on one research question (RQ). The corresponding RQ is listed at the top of each section, making it easy for you to reference the research question associated with the interview question (IQ) you are evaluating.

You have the option to provide feedback on whether the question should:

- Remain as it is ("Keep as is")
- Be removed ("Delete")
- Be revised (if so, please specify how; choose "Other")

Before you begin, please review the table below, which demonstrates how my research questions correspond with my proposed interview questions. The interview questions are numbered to indicate their order in the interview protocol.

I understand that your time is limited, and I genuinely appreciate your willingness to assist me. Please don't hesitate to ask if you have any questions.

**Research Questions & Interview Questions**

| Research Questions | Corresponding Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ1:** What challenges do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners face within institutions of higher education? | <span style="color:red">Icebreaker: Tell me a little bit about your career.</span><br>IQ1: Think of an incident or situation when you wondered, even if briefly, "is it worth it to continue this work? – or I can't do that anymore". Tell me what happened, including how your emotional and physical health was affected.<br>IQ4: Think about other situations where challenges in your work as a DEI&J practitioner similarly discouraged you.<br>   ●   Follow-Up: What were those challenges?<br>IQ 7: What other challenges have you faced in your work as a DEI&J practitioner? |
| **RQ 2:** What strategies do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners use to overcome those challenges? | IQ2: How did you deal with this challenge?<br>IQ3: What did you learn?<br>IQ5: How did you deal with this challenge?<br>IQ6: What did you learn?<br>IQ8: How did you deal with this challenge?<br>IQ9: What did you learn? |
| **RQ3:** How do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners track, measure and define success? | IQ10: How would you define success for you as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions?<br>IQ11: How do you measure and track your success as a Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioner in higher education institutions? |
| **RQ4:** What recommendations do Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners have for emerging leaders in the field? | IQ12: If there was one thing you could have done differently, what would that be?<br>IQ13: What recommendations would you give to Black women Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice practitioners at higher education institutions to ensure they achieve success? |

If you believe that there is a need for additional questions, kindly provide your suggestions below.

Thank you for helping me complete my dissertation journey! I appreciate your time.