

DISSERTATION

NAVIGATING RESISTANCE, ADVANCING EQUITY: AN INTERPRETATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICERS
EXPERIENCE, INTERPRET, AND RESPOND TO ANTI-DEI SENTIMENT
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Submitted by

Gloria Noronha

School of Education

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Doctoral Committee:

Advisor: Susana Muñoz

Vincent Basile
Ryan Barone
Susan James

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ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING RESISTANCE, ADVANCING EQUITY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICERS EXPERIENCE, INTERPRET, AND RESPOND TO ANTI-DEI SENTIMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This dissertation examines how Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives. Amid growing sociopolitical backlash, colleges and universities have become contested spaces where CDOs are tasked with leading organizational change while confronting structural resistance. This study illuminates how CDOs make meaning of their leadership roles and sustain equity efforts under intensifying scrutiny and constraint.

Grounded in a social constructivist paradigm and employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews with CDOs at public and private institutions across New England. This region carries historical commitments to equity alongside contemporary political tensions, making it a meaningful context for examining CDO leadership in the current anti-DEI climate. The study is guided by a multi-layered conceptual framework that integrates four interrelated theories. Critical race theory provides a foundation for understanding how systemic racism and racialized discourse shape public perceptions and institutional policies. The theory of racialized organizations shows how racial inequality is embedded within organizational structures. Political astuteness theory offers insight into how CDOs navigate institutional power dynamics and build strategic coalitions.

Sensemaking theory illuminates how CDOs interpret ambiguous situations, construct meaning, and adapt their leadership practices in real time.

Through this inquiry, the study contributes new insight into how CDOs operate within racialized institutions, respond to politically charged environments, and engage in meaning-making processes that reframe constraints as openings for change. By centering the lived experiences and strategic responses of ten CDOs across New England, this research offers a nuanced portrait of equity leadership during a period marked by polarization, policy rollbacks, and organized opposition to DEI efforts in U.S. higher education.

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Opening

I read the message three times, sitting at my desk at the end of a long day, the office quiet in the way it only becomes after most people have left.

It arrived without warning. A forwarded email from a colleague at another institution. A brief note at the top, then the message she had received. Her role was being eliminated.

The language was precise and practiced, full of restructuring, alignment, shifting priorities, and a need to redistribute the work. It moved carefully, as institutional language often does when it is designed to obscure more than it reveals. The message made one thing clear through its omissions. The institution had chosen to retain the language of equity while removing the person responsible for carrying it.

I lingered in the words longer than I expected. I pictured her office, her students, the committees she had sustained, the reports she had authored, the meetings where she translated pain into terms the institution could recognize. I thought about the unjust demands placed on CDOs to make equity visible enough to signal commitment, operational enough to serve institutional goals, and contained enough to avoid political consequence. I thought about how quickly that work could be renamed, redistributed, diluted, or erased.

As I sat with her message, I began to think about my own day and the ways it required a similar performance. Conversations in which I adjusted language so it would land. Meetings where I carried more than I named. Moments when I made tension legible for others while keeping its weight in my own body.

One of those moments involved a student who had come to talk with me after class. He had asked whether his identity was something he was expected to defend in the classroom or something he was expected to leave at the door.

I answered with the care the role demands, measured and deliberate, attentive to policy, climate, power, and what the room could hold. He nodded. I nodded. We both understood the distance between the answer I could offer and the answer he deserved.

By evening, my colleague's role elimination felt less like distant news and more like a signal moving across institutions, a warning carried in familiar language. This is the dimension of CDO work that resists easy explanation. The visible moments, the statements, the initiatives, the public commitments, tell only part of the story. Beneath them is a continuous process of calibration. What can be said. What must be protected. What the institution will publicly affirm. What it will quietly abandon when the work becomes inconvenient.

For twenty-five years, I have worked within and alongside efforts focused on equity, access, inclusion, and institutional change. I have learned to read rooms before entering them, to translate institutional language into something a hurting student can use, to absorb ambiguity so others can continue forward, and to hold institutions accountable to commitments that grow more fragile behind closed doors. I have also learned that this labor carries a cost, and that this cost follows a pattern. It accumulates most heavily on those whose identities are already entangled with the commitments they are asked to advance.

This dissertation began with the recognition that my colleague's experience reflected a broader and accelerating pattern. Across the country, CDOs are reading messages like this one, watching roles contract or disappear, preparing for what comes next, and attempting to sustain work that has become increasingly constrained, contested, and costly.

I write from within this phenomenon. I am a CDO. I know the discipline of the role, the pressure of the room, the demands of translation, and the quiet strain of carrying institutional contradiction in one's own body. That proximity required deliberate care throughout this study. It also made the inquiry possible. What follows is an effort to treat that proximity as both resource and responsibility, to interpret with rigor while remaining accountable to the participants who entrusted me with their experiences. Their voices shape every chapter that follows. In ways I have worked to make visible, so does mine.

The conditions that rendered my colleague's role eliminable extend far beyond any single institution. They have been produced through intersecting forces, including federal actions, state legislation, coordinated public campaigns, donor and board pressures, and an expanding reframing of equity work as political excess rather than institutional responsibility. The moment with which this chapter opens is part of a national reconfiguration. To understand the experiences of CDOs in this context, this dissertation begins by examining the broader landscape that has reshaped the conditions of their work.

National Landscape

The DEI landscape in higher education has been reshaped by a convergence of judicial decisions, state legislation, executive action, and institutional retrenchment. The U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* marked a significant legal turning point in the use of race-conscious admissions. In that decision, the Court held that the admissions programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina failed to satisfy constitutional requirements under the Equal Protection Clause and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Although the decision directly addressed admissions, its effects have extended into broader debates about race-conscious programs, institutional equity

infrastructure, and the legal boundaries of diversity-related work in higher education (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023).

The broader significance of *SFFA* lies in the uncertainty it created for colleges and universities seeking to sustain equity commitments while avoiding legal challenge. Institutions began reassessing admissions practices, scholarships, student support programs, hiring language, diversity statements, training requirements, and race-conscious institutional initiatives. This reassessment reflected more than technical compliance. It reflected a changing risk environment in which institutions increasingly interpreted race-conscious equity work through the lens of legal vulnerability, public scrutiny, and political pressure (Ngaos & Garces, 2024; Goldberg, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025).

Federal executive action intensified this shift. On January 21, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14,173, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity.” The order revoked several prior executive actions related to federal equity policy, including Executive Order 11,246, and directed federal agencies to terminate programs, guidance, and requirements that the administration characterized as unlawful DEI preferences. The order also required federal contracts and grants to include certification language stating that recipients comply with federal anti-discrimination laws and do not operate DEI programs that violate those laws. For higher education institutions that receive federal grants, participate in federal student aid programs, or hold federal contracts, the order expanded the perceived compliance stakes surrounding DEI work (Exec. Order No. 14,173, 2025).

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights reinforced this enforcement posture through its February 14, 2025, Dear Colleague Letter. The letter framed *SFFA* as establishing a broader standard for evaluating race-conscious practices across educational

settings, including admissions, hiring, promotion, scholarships, student programming, discipline, housing, and campus life. The Department later issued frequently asked questions to clarify its interpretation. Although the Department described the letter as guidance rather than binding law, its language generated significant institutional concern because it linked continued federal funding to institutional compliance with the Department's interpretation of Title VI (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2025a, 2025b).

That federal guidance quickly became contested. On April 24, 2025, a federal court enjoined the Department from enforcing or implementing the February 14 Dear Colleague Letter, the related frequently asked questions, the End DEI Portal, and the certification requirement against the plaintiffs and affiliated entities in *National Education Association v. United States Department of Education*. The Department's own posted notice subsequently stated that the Office for Civil Rights would not take enforcement action or otherwise implement those materials until further notice. Even with enforcement paused, the guidance had already shaped institutional behavior by encouraging rapid reviews of DEI language, programming, web content, funding structures, and student-facing initiatives (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2025a).

Federal funding decisions also signaled a more aggressive enforcement climate. In February 2025, the U.S. Department of Education announced the termination of more than \$600 million in teacher-training grants that it described as supporting "divisive ideologies," including critical race theory, DEI, social justice activism, anti-racism, white privilege, and white supremacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, para. 1). In *Department of Education v. California* (2025), the Supreme Court permitted the Department to proceed with the contested grant terminations while litigation continued, concluding that the government was likely to

demonstrate that the district court lacked jurisdiction to order continued grant payments. The underlying legality of the grant terminations remained unresolved. Together, these developments reinforced a broader perception that equity-related programs could become vulnerable when tied to federal funding, even while the underlying legal questions remained unsettled (*Department of Education v. California*, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

State-level action has further narrowed the landscape. By spring 2024, nine states had enacted anti-DEI legislation affecting higher education, with additional states considering similar measures. These laws have targeted DEI offices, mandatory diversity training, diversity statements, race-conscious hiring or admissions practices, and equity-related programming. Recent empirical research found that anti-DEI laws were associated with colleges and universities losing DEI offices between 2020 and 2024. At the same time, the same study found that student organizing continued, with some campuses in anti-DEI states gaining Black, Latinx, and Native American student groups during the same period. This pattern suggests that anti-DEI legislation can weaken formal institutional infrastructure while also prompting students and communities to create alternative spaces of support and belonging (Goldberg, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025).

For CDOs, this national landscape has made equity leadership more visible, more constrained, and more politically fraught. The post-*SFFA* environment has required CDOs to navigate legal ambiguity, shifting institutional risk tolerance, executive caution, state legislative pressure, and federal enforcement signals. Many institutions have responded by renaming offices, revising public-facing language, relocating programs, broadening eligibility criteria, or embedding equity work into other administrative structures. These adaptations reflect the

tension at the center of this study. CDOs are being asked to sustain equity commitments while the language, infrastructure, and legitimacy of DEI work are under heightened scrutiny.

Within this volatile national context, CDO roles have become both more vital and more vulnerable. The current moment reveals that DEI work in higher education is shaped by more than institutional mission statements or campus climate goals. It is shaped by courts, legislatures, executive agencies, funding structures, and public narratives about race, merit, neutrality, and belonging. This study examines how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to these pressures as they continue advancing equity work within institutions navigating legal uncertainty and political backlash.

Statement of Problem

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education have become central to how colleges and universities respond to long-standing inequities in access, campus climate, curriculum, hiring, retention, and student success. Research on diverse learning environments shows that equity-centered campus change requires attention to institutional structures, organizational culture, and the conditions that shape students' experiences of belonging and success (Hurtado et al., 2012). Within this context, the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) role emerged as a senior-level structure for coordinating institutional strategy, advising executive leadership, supporting campus climate work, and embedding equity goals across academic and administrative systems (Leon, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2020).

The conditions surrounding this work have become increasingly constrained. The Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), state-level anti-DEI legislation, and public campaigns against critical

race theory and diversity initiatives have intensified legal, political, and institutional scrutiny of equity work in higher education. These developments have narrowed the language, structures, and tools available to institutions, including DEI offices, diversity statements, training programs, race-conscious admissions practices, identity-based student support, and equity-focused curricula (Goldberg, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023). For CDOs, this climate creates a leadership terrain marked by uncertainty, heightened visibility, and pressure to preserve the substance of equity work while navigating institutional caution and external political threat.

CDOs therefore occupy a complex organizational position. They are expected to lead transformative change, advise senior leaders, respond to campus climate concerns, support minoritized communities, build coalitions, and translate institutional commitments into policy and practice. At the same time, their authority is often shaped by uneven reporting structures, limited resources, role ambiguity, and institutional cultures that may embrace the language of diversity while resisting the structural changes equity work requires (Ahmed, 2012; Leon, 2014; Ray, 2019; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). This contradiction places CDOs inside the very organizations they are asked to change, requiring them to advance equity while working within racialized institutional arrangements that can constrain their legitimacy, authority, and effectiveness.

These pressures are especially consequential for CDOs from racially minoritized backgrounds. Recent scholarship on African American CDOs shows that the title itself does not protect leaders from racialized scrutiny, anti-Blackness, or institutional marginalization. Koffi (2024) found that African American CDOs are often compelled to redirect time, energy, and political capital away from strategic equity goals to manage racialized perceptions of their

leadership. This burden reflects a deeper organizational problem. The individuals hired to address inequity may also experience the very racialized conditions their roles are designed to transform.

Although existing scholarship has examined the emergence, structure, and professionalization of the CDO role, less is known about how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment as a lived leadership condition. The current sociopolitical climate raises urgent questions about how CDOs make meaning of their roles, adapt their strategies, sustain their commitments, and navigate institutional resistance while continuing to advance equity work. This study addresses that gap by examining the experiences and meaning-making processes of CDOs in higher education as they lead under intensified anti-DEI pressure.

By focusing on CDOs' lived experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of equity leadership in a hostile sociopolitical climate. It examines how CDOs interpret institutional contradiction, respond to racialized and political constraints, and sustain equity-centered leadership amid legal uncertainty, public backlash, and organizational resistance. In doing so, the study positions CDOs as critical meaning-makers and strategic actors whose experiences illuminate the broader challenges of advancing institutional equity in contemporary higher education.

Research Question

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while continuing to advance

institutional equity initiatives. Grounded in a social constructivist paradigm and guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study centers the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of CDOs as they lead within politically charged and institutionally complex environments. IPA is especially appropriate for this inquiry because it allows for close attention to how participants describe their experiences, how they assign meaning to those experiences, and how those meanings are interpreted within the broader context of their professional roles (Smith et al., 2022).

This study examines how CDOs understand their leadership identities, institutional responsibilities, and strategic choices amid shifting legal, political, and organizational pressures. Rather than treating CDO leadership only as a formal administrative function, this study approaches it as interpretive work shaped by race, power, institutional history, and organizational constraint. This focus aligns with scholarship on racialized organizations, which shows that institutional rules, resources, and practices are often structured through racial logics that shape legitimacy, authority, and agency (Ray, 2019).

The study also seeks to understand the leadership practices CDOs use to sustain equity work in contested environments. These practices may include political astuteness, relational coalition-building, strategic communication, adaptive framing, and efforts to embed equity into institutional systems. Political astuteness is especially relevant because CDOs must often read institutional dynamics, navigate competing interests, build alignment, and preserve movement toward equity goals amid uncertainty and resistance (Hartley et al., 2015; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

By centering CDOs' lived experiences, this study investigates how equity leaders make sense of their work while responding to institutional ambiguity, racialized scrutiny, and external

political pressure. It asks how CDOs interpret the meaning of their roles, how they adapt their leadership strategies, and how they sustain commitments to equity when the language, structures, and legitimacy of DEI work are increasingly contested.

Significance

This study is significant because it extends scholarship on CDO leadership by focusing on meaning-making, lived experience, and interpretation in the current anti-DEI climate. Existing scholarship has examined the emergence, structure, and professionalization of the CDO role, including the strategic responsibilities, reporting structures, and institutional conditions that shape CDO work (Leon, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2020). This study builds on that foundation by examining how CDOs experience their roles from within the conditions of political backlash, racialized institutional constraint, and organizational ambiguity.

The study also contributes to research on racialized organizations by showing how CDOs interpret and navigate institutions that often present themselves as neutral while distributing authority, resources, credibility, and protection unevenly. Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations provides a useful lens for understanding why equity work can become institutionally constrained even when it is formally endorsed. By examining CDOs' accounts of leadership under anti-DEI conditions, this study offers insight into how racialized organizational dynamics are lived, felt, interpreted, and strategically negotiated by those charged with advancing institutional change.

This study is also significant for leadership theory. CDOs lead in environments where formal authority may be limited, institutional support may be uneven, and political conditions may shift quickly. Their leadership requires more than technical competence or administrative

expertise. It requires sensemaking, political judgment, relational trust, and the ability to preserve purpose while recalibrating strategy. By bringing sensemaking theory and political astuteness into conversation with CDO leadership, this study clarifies how equity leaders interpret ambiguity, assess risk, build coalitions, and act strategically in contested institutional spaces (Hartley et al., 2015; Weick, 1995).

The study has practical significance for colleges and universities seeking to sustain equity commitments in a period of legal uncertainty and political challenge. Findings may help institutions better understand the conditions CDOs need to lead effectively, including clear authority, adequate resources, visible executive support, institutional accountability, and protection from racialized and political backlash. The study may also inform how institutions structure CDO roles, align equity work with mission and strategy, and avoid placing the burden of institutional transformation on individuals without providing the authority and infrastructure required to support that work.

The study has policy significance because anti-DEI legislation and administrative retrenchment are reshaping the terrain of equity work in higher education. Recent research shows that anti-DEI laws are associated with the loss of DEI offices, even as students continue organizing to create and sustain spaces of belonging and support (Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). By examining how CDOs interpret and respond to these conditions, this study offers insight into how policy environments affect institutional equity infrastructure, leadership practice, and the daily labor of sustaining commitments to marginalized communities.

Finally, this study is significant because it amplifies the voices of CDOs as scholar-practitioners, institutional strategists, and meaning-makers. CDOs occupy roles that require them to translate equity values into institutional practice while navigating scrutiny,

contradiction, and resistance. Centering their experiences provides a more layered understanding of equity leadership as lived work. It also reflects my own reflexive awareness as a practitioner-scholar whose professional proximity to this phenomenon deepens the responsibility to interpret participants' experiences with care, rigor, and ethical attentiveness.

Researcher Positionality

As a Tanzanian American, multiracial queer scholar, mother, and artist, my identity is deeply intertwined with my commitment to DEI. The intersections of my racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds have profoundly shaped my worldview, informing both my research interests and leadership in higher education. Experiencing the challenges of navigating academic spaces as someone with multiple marginalized identities has given me firsthand insight into the systemic barriers that persist, fueling my passion for DEI work and my dedication to ensuring that marginalized voices are centered in every initiative.

Over the past 25 years, I have been deeply involved in DEI efforts at various institutions—from large public universities to small private colleges. Through roles as an admissions counselor, diversity-focused faculty member, Director of Training and Education, Bias Response Coordinator, Title IX Coordinator, Senior Diversity Officer, and currently as Chief Equity Officer and Vice President for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice, I have gained a comprehensive understanding of the challenges DEI leaders face. My management, marketing, and public relations background enables me to build effective bridges between academic institutions and surrounding communities, facilitating greater access to higher education for underrepresented groups. These experiences significantly inform my research as I explore how DEI leaders navigate institutional resistance and drive change in today's sociopolitical climate.

I am also acutely aware that my personal experiences with discrimination and microaggressions, as well as my professional journey as a DEI leader, shape how I engage with this research. These lived experiences inform my commitment to fostering environments where every individual feels a sense of belonging, but they also influence the lens through which I interpret institutional dynamics. Rooted in a social constructivist paradigm and guided by a phenomenological approach, this study acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. I employ IPA as my analytic framework, which centers the subjective experiences of participants and the meaning they make of those experiences. Rather than striving for neutrality, I embrace reflexivity as a core methodological practice, recognizing that my positionality is a source of insight and potential bias. To honor the authenticity of participants' voices, I designed open-ended, semi-structured interviews that allow DEI leaders to share their experiences in their terms. I engaged in ongoing critical reflection throughout the research process to remain attentive to how my perspectives shape interpretation.

I view my positionality as a distinct strength. The convergence of my lived experiences and professional expertise allows me to approach this work with empathy and critical awareness. I understand the urgency and complexity of DEI initiatives through personal experience and the institutional and political contexts in which this work unfolds. This dual lens strengthens my ability to explore the lived realities of DEI leaders with depth and sensitivity. In alignment with a phenomenological and social constructivist approach, I acknowledge that meaning is co-created through dialogue and that my interpretation is an integral part of the research process. This perspective fuels my commitment to examining the nuanced leadership strategies DEI practitioners must employ, especially the delicate balance between advocating for marginalized communities and navigating the shifting, often resistant, politics of higher education.

My passion for global engagement and international relations broadens my understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Navigating multiple cultural and social identities has equipped me to work effectively across diverse environments and institutional settings, enabling me to consider localized organizational contexts and broader societal and cultural dynamics. This global perspective enriches my research by allowing me to approach DEI leadership with a more nuanced, layered understanding that appreciates the complexity of identity, power, and resistance within and beyond higher education institutions.

Ultimately, my personal and professional experiences uniquely position me as a researcher in the field of DEI. While I remain vigilant about the influence of my positionality, I recognize that my background affords both insight and responsibility. Guided by a social constructivist paradigm and IPA, I view knowledge as co-constructed through relationships, dialogue, and context. My commitment is not to neutrality but to authenticity and reflexivity—to capturing the lived experiences of DEI leaders as they navigate institutional resistance and pursue equity-driven change. Through this research, I hope to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on DEI leadership, particularly by illuminating the strategies, tensions, and transformative possibilities that emerge in the practice of CDOs and other equity-minded practitioners in higher education.

Approach to the Study

This qualitative study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how CDOs in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity efforts. IPA is grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics and is designed to explore the nuanced, subjective experiences through which individuals make sense of significant events (Smith et al., 2009). This methodological approach

is particularly suited for understanding the lived experiences of CDOs as they navigate contested institutional and political environments.

The study is situated within a social constructivist paradigm, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning through social interaction and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology align with the study's commitment to exploring DEI leadership's fluid, context-dependent realities in higher education. This paradigm is well suited to capture how CDOs construct meaning in environments shaped by resistance, racialization, and political scrutiny.

The conceptual framework integrates four interrelated theories organized across societal, organizational, strategic, and interpretive levels. At the societal level, critical race theory provides the overarching explanatory and evaluative foundation for examining how race and racism structure higher education and for assessing whether institutional operations produce just outcomes even when they are presented as neutral, technical, or procedural (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Its emphasis on the endemic nature of racism situates anti-DEI pressure within enduring systems of racial retrenchment rather than treating it as an isolated political disruption. Interest convergence explains why institutional commitments to equity may weaken when they no longer align with dominant organizational interests. Intersectionality illuminates how CDOs' racial, gendered, professional, and other social positions shape their exposure to institutional risk and constraint. Counter-storytelling establishes participants' accounts as authoritative sources of knowledge about racialized institutional life, while the critique of liberalism and colorblindness reveals how appeals to neutrality, merit, and incrementalism can preserve inequitable conditions. At the organizational level, the theory of

racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) specifies how these broader racial dynamics become embedded in institutional structures, policies, resource distributions, and decision-making processes that shape the authority, vulnerability, and work of CDOs. At the strategic level, political astuteness theory (Hartley et al., 2015, 2019) explains how CDOs assess power dynamics, build coalitions, calibrate language and action, and advance equity priorities within politically constrained environments. At the interpretive level, sensemaking theory and its critical extension (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995) explain how CDOs notice and interpret ambiguous institutional cues, construct plausible accounts of rapidly changing conditions, and continually revise their leadership responses. Critical sensemaking further centers the influence of identity, positionality, discourse, and organizational power on whose interpretations gain legitimacy and whose interpretations are contested, minimized, or penalized. Together, these theories provide a layered framework for examining how CDOs experience racialized institutional conditions, interpret their meaning from socially and organizationally positioned standpoints, and respond strategically while advancing equity initiatives.

Data was collected through semi-structured, reflective interviews to elicit detailed narratives of participants' experiences and strategies (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Using purposive sampling, the study recruited CDOs from higher education institutions in New England to ensure contextual relevance and depth (Patton, 2015). All interviews were audio- and video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed according to IPA protocols, with attention to emergent themes, interpretive patterns, and leadership practices in sociopolitical contexts. Through this methodological and theoretical integration, the study seeks to advance scholarly understanding of how CDOs make sense of and strategically navigate anti-DEI environments.

Assumptions

This study rests on several key assumptions. First, it assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by context, consistent with interpretive epistemology and relativist ontology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also assumes that CDOs—as equity-focused leaders embedded within structurally racialized institutions—hold critical experiential knowledge about the challenges, contradictions, and strategies of DEI leadership.

Second, the study assumes that DEI work is necessary and contested, often unfolding within institutions that simultaneously demand and destabilize equity initiatives. CDOs' experiences are assumed to reflect broader sociopolitical dynamics, particularly those involving race, power, and resistance. The study also assumes that sensemaking is a central cognitive process by which CDOs interpret uncertainty and develop adaptive responses (Weick, 1995) and that political astuteness is critical to their success in navigating institutional constraints (Hartley et al., 2019).

Finally, qualitative methods, especially IPA, are assumed to be well suited for exploring the emotional, strategic, and interpretive dimensions of leadership under pressure (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were expected to provide honest, reflective narratives, acknowledging that their positionality and meaning-making processes shape their accounts.

Limitations

Several limitations are inherent in this research design. First, as with all qualitative, interview-based research, the study relies on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias (Patton, 2015). While efforts were made to foster trust and confidentiality, the politicized climate surrounding DEI may have limited participants' openness, particularly when discussing institutional constraints or personal challenges.

Second, the study's use of IPA prioritizes depth and context over breadth and generalizability (Smith et al., 2009). While the findings provide rich insights into the experiences of CDOs in New England, they may not be readily transferable to other institutional or geographic contexts.

Third, the interpretive nature of IPA requires the researcher to be reflexively aware of their positionality, assumptions, and influence on data analysis. Researcher subjectivity was managed through memoing, peer debriefing, and transparency in analytic decisions. Still, interpretation remains co-constructed, and different researchers might derive different insights from the same data.

Finally, given the rapidly evolving policy and cultural landscape surrounding DEI in higher education, the findings may represent a snapshot of a specific moment rather than a static set of truths. Continued research is necessary to understand how DEI leadership adapts over time in response to ongoing political shifts.

The following section defines key terms central to the study's focus and framework, establishing clarity and precision in discussing the complex phenomena under investigation.

Definitions of Key Terms

Anti-DEI Sentiment/Environment

This refers to the broader environment of organized political, legislative, donor, and institutional resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education. Participants in this study described this environment as a climate of heightened scrutiny and constraint that reshaped what could be said publicly, what could be funded, what leaders could safely advance, and what they were expected to absorb quietly as institutions managed reputational risk. This

environment became visible through changing messaging directives, stalled initiatives, tightened approval processes, uneven authority and resources, and the gradual normalization of silence.

Chief Diversity Officer (CDO)

The most senior-ranking diversity official within an institution who is responsible for leading and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. A CDO is crucial in shaping institutional culture, addressing systemic inequities, and driving strategic efforts to promote an inclusive environment. This role often involves collaboration across departments, engagement with stakeholders, and the development of policies that align with the organization's DEI goals (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

A framework rooted in legal and educational scholarship that examines racism as an enduring structural feature of institutions. This study uses CRT to analyze how racial inequities are reproduced in higher education, why institutional commitments to equity may be conditional, and how CDO narratives challenge dominant or colorblind accounts of institutional life. The analysis draws particularly on endemic racism, interest convergence, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, and the critique of liberalism (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Policies and practices aimed at promoting the representation and participation of diverse groups in various contexts, particularly in higher education. Diversity involves recognizing and valuing differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other identities.

Equity emphasizes fairness and justice in policies, practices, and opportunities, ensuring historically marginalized groups access resources and support. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging by creating environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and engaged.

Institutional Resistance

Institutional resistance is the challenges and obstacles individuals or groups face when advocating for organizational change. It can manifest in various forms, such as pushback against DEI initiatives, reluctance to adopt new policies, or a lack of support from leadership. Understanding institutional resistance is essential for CDOs as they work to navigate and overcome these barriers to enact meaningful change.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research methodology focused on examining how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. It combines phenomenological attention to detailed experience with hermeneutic interpretation, recognizing the researcher's role in making sense of participants' meaning-making (Smith et al., 2009).

Make Meaning/Meaning-making

Used more broadly in this study to describe the phenomenological process through which CDOs derive personal and professional significance from their lived experiences. This term aligns with the study's methodological grounding in IPA and reflects how participants interpret their roles, challenges, and identities in the context of institutional DEI work.

Political Astuteness

The ability to understand and navigate complex political contexts and power dynamics within and outside organizations to achieve strategic objectives involves skills such as strategic thinking, stakeholder engagement, and coalition building (Hartley et al., 2015, 2019).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

An institution whose demographic composition is primarily comprised of white campus stakeholders. These institutions are characterized by historic and contemporary racialized institutional ideologies that privilege whiteness in their policies, practices, and procedures.

Racialized Organizations

Drawing on Ray's (2019) theory, racialized organizations are institutions that are not race-neutral but are shaped by embedded racial logics. These logics inform rules, resource distributions, and normative practices that disproportionately benefit dominant groups while marginalizing others. This concept illuminates how DEI work often collides with entrenched organizational structures.

Sensemaking and Critical Sensemaking

Used in this study to describe how CDOs interpret ambiguous, uncertain, or politically volatile institutional conditions and determine how to respond. Weick's (1995) theory emphasizes how individuals notice cues and construct plausible meaning through ongoing social processes. Critical sensemaking extends this framework by examining how identity, positionality, discourse, and organizational power shape what individuals notice, how they interpret events, and whose interpretations are treated as authoritative (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

Together, these concepts form the innermost layer of the study's conceptual model and explain how CDOs interpret racialized institutional conditions and adapt their leadership responses.

Social Constructivism

An epistemological stance asserting that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions and experiences rather than discovered. This paradigm emphasizes the role of culture, context, and social processes in shaping individual interpretations of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sociopolitical Pressures

External influences and challenges shape the context in which organizations operate. Higher education pressures can include anti-DEI legislation, political opposition, societal movements, and public sentiment. CDOs must navigate these pressures while advocating for DEI initiatives, often balancing institutional goals with external expectations.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One establishes the foundation for the study by introducing the evolving and increasingly contested role of CDOs in higher education amid intensifying anti-DEI sentiment. The chapter articulates the purpose of the study, which is to explore how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives, and situates the central research question within a broader sociopolitical and organizational context. Attention is given to the ways institutional resistance, racialized organizational dynamics, and external political pressures shape the conditions under which CDOs lead. The chapter also addresses the significance of the study for

leadership practice, policy development, and organizational change, positioning this inquiry within a tradition of critical, equity-oriented scholarship in higher education.

Chapter Two presents a multidimensional review of the literature that traces the historical development of DEI work in higher education and the emergence and evolution of the CDO role. The chapter critically examines the legal, ideological, and structural manifestations of contemporary anti-DEI backlash and their implications for institutional legitimacy, authority, and equity leadership. This review culminates in the development of an integrated conceptual framework drawing on four interrelated theoretical perspectives: critical race theory, the theory of racialized organizations, political astuteness theory, and sensemaking theory. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding how CDOs navigate power, interpret ambiguity, and exercise agency within racially stratified and politically charged organizational environments. Chapter Two highlights key gaps in the literature, particularly the limited empirical attention to how CDOs make meaning of their leadership experiences amid sustained opposition.

Chapter Three outlines the qualitative methodological approach guiding the study. Grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, the research assumes that meaning is co-constructed through interaction and deeply shaped by context. The study employs IPA to examine how CDOs understand and respond to the lived experience of leading equity work in contested environments. This chapter details the research design, including participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies, with particular attention to IPA's idiographic focus and commitment to the double hermeneutic. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten CDOs across diverse higher education institutions in New England serve as the primary data source. Chapter Three also addresses ethical considerations, reflexivity, and methodological

limitations, preparing the reader for an interpretive analysis that is both rigorous and contextually grounded.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study. The analysis is organized around four interrelated themes that reflect shared patterns of meaning across participants while preserving attention to individual lived experience: Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility; Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal; Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness; and Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis. Together, these themes illuminate how CDOs navigate hostile institutional terrain, carry the embodied and emotional costs of that navigation, enact strategic and relational responses under constraint, and sustain themselves and their work through identity, purpose, and visionary commitment. Thick description and extended participant quotations are used to foreground participants' voices and demonstrate the interpretive process central to IPA. This chapter emphasizes how meaning-making unfolds across experience, identity, and leadership practice.

Chapter Five offers an interpretive discussion and synthesis of the findings, situating them within the study's conceptual framework and the broader literature on equity leadership in higher education. Drawing on critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), sensemaking and critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995), and political astuteness theory (Hartley & Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al., 2015, 2019), this chapter examines how participants' experiences, interpretations, and strategic responses illuminate and extend theoretical understandings of racialized institutions, organizational power, and equity leadership.

Implications for practice and policy are discussed, with particular attention to the preparation, support, authority, and institutional positioning of CDOs navigating hostile environments. The chapter concludes with a reflective consideration of the study's contributions and the enduring significance of equity leadership in an era of sustained contestation.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The contemporary landscape of higher education increasingly demands an intricate understanding of the role and challenges facing Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), as institutions become deeply entangled in national debates over race, equity, and inclusion. Drawing on recent scholarship, the evolution of diversity rationales in higher education is shown to shape both student expectations and organizational outcomes in ways that are tightly connected to broader racial equity struggles (Barnett, 2020; Starck et al., 2021). Together, these studies demonstrate that embedding diversity initiatives into institutional missions' functions both as a response to external pressures and as a reflection of shifting societal values and political dynamics.

Emerging scholarship increasingly depicts DEI leadership as work that transcends technical or procedural execution, positioning it as deeply embedded in strategic decision-making, interpretive leadership, and leaders' own lived experiences. Studies show that CDOs are tasked with navigating intensifying anti-DEI sentiments and contentious legislative initiatives that seek to curtail equity work (Follmer et al., 2024; Lewis & Muñiz, 2024). These external pressures require CDOs to engage in complex meaning-making processes to sustain equity initiatives, highlighting the heavy emotional labor intrinsic to this work (Ueda et al., 2024). Research further indicates that the emotional toll is particularly acute for leaders from historically marginalized backgrounds, underscoring the need for strategies that mitigate burnout and institutionalize robust support structures.

When we move past the emotional and personal impacts on individual CDOs, scholars show that CDO roles are deeply shaped by how higher education has historically been structured and politicized, especially given its ongoing legacy of racial inequality. Scholars argue that

higher education institutions—particularly historically white institutions—often operationalize diversity through instrumental rationales that, when not critically managed, can reproduce stereotyping and discrimination (Barnett, 2020; Starck et al., 2021). These dynamics are further shaped by organizational configurations, as centralized and decentralized structures differentially influence how racial equity is pursued institutionally (Thomas, 2017). Recent studies suggest that effective responses to anti-DEI sentiment require both internal process refinement and active negotiation with broader sociopolitical and legal frameworks, calling for CDO leadership that blends interpretive insight with nuanced awareness of legal and policy shifts (Lewis & Muñiz, 2024).

Together, historical, structural, political, and cognitive perspectives depict DEI work in higher education as simultaneously a profound site of contestation and a locus of transformative possibility. The multifaceted challenges—from legislative attacks on DEI efforts to the internal pressures of emotional labor—demand leadership that is both reflective and strategic (Follmer et al., 2024; Ueda et al., 2024). Positioned at this intersection, CDOs are called to develop and refine leadership practices that are inclusive and adaptive while remaining grounded in long-standing traditions of equity advocacy within higher education (Sun et al., 2024). This dual imperative is central to understanding how CDOs survive and lead transformative change in environments marked by persistent contention and competing narratives.

Against this backdrop of increasing political tension and institutional complexity, my research question is as follows:

Research Question

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

Examining the historical and structural foundations that shape CDOs' work is essential for understanding the context in which they operate. CDOs' experiences and strategies are deeply rooted in the legacy of structural racism and institutional power dynamics that have long defined U.S. higher education. This section explores these foundational elements and provides context for the ways contemporary anti-DEI sentiment emerges from and interacts with long standing patterns of exclusion and inequity in academic institutions.

Origins of Structural Racism in U.S. Institutions

Structural racism in the United States did not emerge as a single event or isolated practice. It developed through overlapping legal, political, economic, and educational systems that organized power around race and protected whiteness as a source of property, belonging, and institutional authority. Understanding this history is essential to this study because CDOs do their work inside institutions shaped by the very inequities they are asked to address. The present anti-DEI climate is therefore best understood through a longer historical arc, one that connects settler colonialism, slavery, racialized law, higher education, academic suppression, and contemporary attacks on equity work.

Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Legal Construction of Race

Structural racism in the United States emerged through the intertwined projects of settler colonialism and chattel slavery. European colonization depended on narratives that framed Indigenous peoples as obstacles to conquest, settlement, and national expansion. These narratives helped justify land seizure, forced removal, cultural suppression, and elimination as ordinary features of state building. At the same time, chattel slavery transformed Black people into property within a legal and economic order designed to secure white wealth, political authority, and social dominance. Together, settler colonialism and slavery produced more than individual

prejudice or isolated acts of exclusion. They established whiteness as a durable structure of power that shaped American law, property, citizenship, education, and institutional life (Harris, 1993; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilder, 2013; Wolfe, 2006).

Racial hierarchy was then codified and reproduced through law and public policy. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited citizenship to “free white persons,” establishing race as a legal boundary around belonging. Later legal regimes continued to define who could own property, move freely, vote, attend school, access public accommodations, and claim protection under the law. After emancipation, Jim Crow laws, segregation, racial violence, and voter suppression adapted racial domination to new legal and political conditions. These shifts show how racial power survived formal legal change by moving through new institutional forms and by recasting exclusion as neutrality, order, or tradition (Alexander, 2012; Haney López, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2015; Rothstein, 2017).

Higher Education as a Site of Reproduction and Resistance

Higher education developed within these same racial formations. Colleges and universities were not separate from the racial order of the nation. They benefited from Indigenous dispossession, slavery, segregation, philanthropic wealth tied to racial capitalism, and admissions and hiring practices that protected white access to knowledge, credentials, and authority. Even as higher education presented itself as a neutral site of merit and intellectual inquiry, its institutional histories were often entangled with the production and preservation of racial hierarchy. This history matters for the present study because CDOs are not leading equity work in institutions untouched by racism. They are leading within organizations whose structures, traditions, and claims to neutrality have often been shaped by racism itself (Ray, 2019; Stein, 2022; Wilder, 2013).

Colleges and universities have also been sites of resistance, counter-narrative, and struggle. The delayed recognition of ethnic studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, and other fields grounded in the knowledge of marginalized communities demonstrates that higher education has long been contested terrain. These programs emerged because students, faculty, and communities challenged institutions that had excluded their histories, erased their intellectual traditions, and narrowed the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Their presence within the academy reflects institutional change, while the recurring resistance to these fields reveals how deeply racialized knowledge hierarchies remain embedded in higher education (Rojas, 2007; Stein, 2022). These foundational structures of racial hierarchy continued to shape American institutions in subtle and overt ways well into the twentieth century, with academic institutions reflecting and reinforcing these patterns through specific mechanisms of control and ideological policing.

Surveillance, Suppression, and Contemporary Anti-DEI Politics

This tension is also visible in the academy's long history of surveillance and suppression. During the McCarthy era, universities narrowed academic freedom through loyalty oaths, investigations, blacklisting, and dismissals aimed at scholars whose ideas were deemed politically dangerous. That history helps illuminate a recurring institutional pattern, in that universities often claim to protect inquiry, yet they can also discipline dissent when external political pressures intensify. For equity leaders, this history is especially important because current debates over race, diversity, and justice are unfolding inside institutions with long memories of compliance, caution, and political self-protection (Heins, 2013; Schrecker, 1986).

Contemporary attacks on DEI initiatives and efforts to restrict critical race theory echo these earlier patterns while taking shape through the specific politics of the present moment.

Anti-DEI legislation, administrative retrenchment, and public campaigns against equity work limit how colleges and universities can name inequality, weaken institutional equity infrastructure, and place diversity leaders under heightened scrutiny. Recent research shows that anti-DEI laws have contributed to the loss of DEI offices, while faculty and students continue to experience the emotional, professional, and organizational consequences of these restrictions (Goldberg, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025).

For CDOs, this historical context is central. The current anti-DEI climate is a contemporary political formation, and it is also part of a longer institutional history in which racial hierarchy is preserved through claims of neutrality, legality, and institutional protection. CDOs therefore enter roles created to address inequities that higher education institutions have helped produce and sustain. Their work takes place inside the very structures they are asked to transform, which helps explain why equity leadership often involves historical consciousness, political judgment, institutional critique, and strategic care at the same time.

As higher education institutions began to acknowledge these historical power structures and their ongoing effects, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the gradual emergence of formalized DEI initiatives and the establishment of CDO positions as institutional responses to address these deeply embedded inequities.

The Evolution of DEI and the Rise of the CDO in Higher Education

Understanding the emergence of the CDO role in higher education requires attention to the broader historical trajectory of DEI efforts in United States colleges and universities. DEI as a professional and strategic agenda developed over several decades through intertwined social, legal, and institutional changes shaped by civil rights struggles, demographic shifts, and calls for systemic transformation. This history reveals a recurring pattern in which gains in equity work

are followed by retrenchment, and each movement from compliance to inclusion to strategic integration prompts new forms of resistance. This cyclical pattern continues to shape the conditions under which CDOs lead today and informs how they interpret their roles within longer institutional and social justice narratives. The following subsections trace how DEI initiatives developed from compliance-based mandates to strategic imperatives embedded in institutional missions and how this trajectory culminated in the creation of the CDO role at the executive level.

Foundation and Civil Rights Era (1950s-1960s)

foundational Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s established legal and social frameworks that set the stage for DEI initiatives in American higher education. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court declared racially segregated public schools inherently unequal and unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The ruling disrupted the doctrine of “separate but equal” and framed educational segregation as a constitutional violation. Although *Brown* centered on elementary and secondary education, its constitutional reasoning reinforced and accelerated desegregation efforts in public colleges and universities (Mack, 2009; Wertham, 1976). Subsequent federal actions, including Executive Order No. 10,925, issued in 1961, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, expanded this momentum by linking federal contracting and financial assistance to nondiscrimination requirements. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 further reinforced a broader national commitment to civil rights that supported efforts to widen educational access (Landsberg, 2014; Mack, 2009). Together, these developments established educational equity as a constitutional and policy priority and created the conditions for later diversity and inclusion infrastructures.

In the early 1960s, momentum for systemic change expanded as federal policy began to address discrimination more directly. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order No. 10,925, which required federal contractors to “take affirmative action” to ensure that applicants and employees were treated without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin (Exec. Order No. 10,925, 1961). The order represented a significant federal expansion of affirmative action and created a framework that later influenced employment and admissions practices in higher education (Mack, 2009). The 1963 integration of the University of Alabama by Vivian Malone and James A. Hood further illustrated how the transition from exclusion to inclusion often unfolded through intense conflict and resistance. President Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to enforce the students’ admission after Governor George Wallace attempted to block their entry (Landsberg, 2014).

The legislative developments of this period extended and deepened these shifts. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs and institutions receiving federal financial assistance, thereby broadening federal oversight of colleges and universities (Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1964; Mack, 2009; Wertham, 1976). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 reinforced a broader national commitment to civil rights and supported efforts to expand educational access and advance institutional reform (Mack, 2009; Voting Rights Act of 1965, 1965). Together, these policies consolidated a federal framework that linked civil rights enforcement with educational opportunity and established the groundwork for later diversity and inclusion initiatives. Building on these legal foundations, colleges and universities increasingly translated broad federal mandates into concrete institutional practices during the decades that followed.

Implementation and Expansion Phase (1970s-1980s)

During the implementation and expansion period of the 1970s and 1980s, higher education institutions began to operationalize federal civil rights mandates in more systematic ways. In *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* (1971), the Supreme Court established that facially neutral employment practices could violate Title VII when they produced racially disparate effects and lacked a demonstrable relationship to job performance or business necessity. This decision expanded the legal understanding of discrimination beyond evidence of discriminatory intent to include the consequences of employment policies and practices (Gutierrez & Green, 2004). The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 strengthened federal enforcement authority and extended Title VII protections to employees of educational institutions, encouraging colleges and universities to identify and address barriers within their employment practices (Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972; Gutierrez & Green, 2004). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 further expanded institutional equity obligations by prohibiting disability discrimination in colleges, universities, and other programs receiving federal financial assistance (Rehabilitation Act of 1973). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, reinforced a broader national commitment to educational access for students with disabilities, particularly within elementary and secondary education. Collectively, these developments pushed institutions to confront inequities across multiple dimensions of identity and established the groundwork for more expansive understandings of diversity in later decades. Even as legal protections expanded, many institutional responses continued to frame inequity through perceived student deficits rather than examining the policies, practices, and structures that shaped unequal outcomes.

Deficit Model Era and Challenges (1970s-1990s)

Despite these advances, many institutional approaches from the 1970s through the 1990s reflected deficit-oriented understandings of diversity. These approaches often framed students from racially underrepresented groups as lacking preparation, readiness, or fit and directed resources toward remedial interventions designed to help students adapt to predominantly White institutions rather than transform the institutional policies and practices that produced inequity (Bensimon, 2005). The Supreme Court's fragmented decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) reflected the complexity of this period. The Court invalidated the university's fixed racial set-aside while permitting race to be considered as one factor within a holistic admissions process. The decision positioned student-body diversity as a constitutionally permissible educational interest while also establishing legal constraints on how institutions could pursue it (Gutierrez & Green, 2004; *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 1978). Over time, scholars and practitioners critiqued deficit-oriented approaches for locating responsibility within students and advanced frameworks centered on institutional accountability, campus climate, and organizational transformation (Bensimon, 2005; Milem et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2005). These critiques helped establish the foundation for later equity and inclusive excellence frameworks.

Legal and social transformations initiated during the Civil Rights era fundamentally reconfigured American higher education. Landmark court decisions and subsequent federal policies dismantled formal segregation and expanded educational access, while colleges and universities increasingly connected compliance with antidiscrimination requirements to the educational benefits of diverse learning environments (Mack, 2009; Milem et al., 2005; Wertham, 1976). The gradual movement from compliance-centered interventions toward

institution-wide reform illustrates the complex legacy of civil rights litigation and policy in shaping aspirations for a more inclusive higher education system (Bensimon, 2005; Gutierrez & Green, 2004; Williams et al., 2005). Sustained critiques of deficit-oriented practices and growing recognition of demographic change encouraged institutions to reconsider where responsibility for equity should rest, shifting attention from student adjustment toward institutional structures, cultures, and practices (Bensimon, 2005; Williams et al., 2005).

Shifting Paradigms: From Compliance to Inclusion (1990s-2000s)

The shift from deficit-based approaches to inclusive excellence represents more than a change in terminology and signals a fundamental reorientation of where responsibility for change is located. Early DEI paradigms tended to position students, particularly students from underrepresented groups, as problems that needed remediation, while institutional structures remained largely intact. Inclusive excellence reframed diversity as a matter of institutional responsibility and called on colleges and universities to scrutinize their own cultures, policies, and practices. This reorientation helps explain the intensity of the current backlash against DEI work, since efforts that move equity from peripheral student services into core institutional functions directly challenge entrenched power and privilege. During the 1990s, as demographic shifts and globalization accelerated, many institutions began to reconceptualize diversity as an educational asset rather than solely a legal requirement, which opened space for broader frameworks that attended to campus culture and climate (Smith, 2009). This reorientation toward institutional responsibility found its most influential expression in the inclusive excellence framework.

Inclusive Excellence Model (2000s-present)

The inclusive excellence model developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities extends this shift by centering institutional transformation rather than student remediation. The model calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion to be embedded within institutional mission, culture, and everyday practice and presents excellence and diversity as interdependent goals rather than separate priorities (AAC&U, 2005; Williams et al., 2005). In this framework, equity work touches curricula, hiring, assessment, and resource allocation and moves from isolated programs toward institution-wide responsibility. This approach provides an important conceptual bridge between earlier compliance-focused efforts and contemporary strategies that treat DEI as integral to academic quality and institutional effectiveness.

The University of Michigan's trajectory illustrates how inclusive excellence can take shape in practice. Michigan initially focused on admissions policies and legal defenses of race-conscious admissions, yet over time developed the Michigan Mandate as a comprehensive plan that integrated diversity into curricula, faculty hiring, and institutional planning. This broader strategy corresponded with improved retention across demographic groups and signals that durable change is more likely when diversity work becomes central to institutional strategy rather than confined to access alone (Gurin et al., 2004). In contrast, research on Historically Black Colleges and Universities shows how institutions achieve strong outcomes for underrepresented students when inclusive practices are woven into institutional missions and cultures from the outset. Valdez and Kelp (2023) find that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often attain higher retention rates for underrepresented students precisely because inclusion is treated as intrinsic to institutional identity rather than as an added program. Together, these examples show that the move toward inclusive excellence has produced

meaningful gains, yet they also reveal a persistent gap between rhetorical commitments and the translation of inclusive values into consistent, measurable practice across institutions. This gap remains a critical focus for CDOs who are tasked with closing the distance between institutional language and lived experience.

In contrast to many predominantly white institutions that struggled to move beyond superficial initiatives, HBCUs demonstrate the power of embedding inclusive practices within institutional missions. Valdez and Kelp (2023) report that HBCUs often achieve higher retention rates for underrepresented students because inclusive practices are woven into institutional culture rather than treated as separate programs. The broader shift toward inclusive excellence marks important progress, yet scholarship also shows that many institutions find it difficult to turn inclusive rhetoric into consistent and measurable practice. This persistent gap between stated commitments and everyday implementation becomes a central concern for equity leaders and provides a key backdrop for the CDO role. As the inclusive excellence model gained traction, the scope of DEI work also widened to address an expanding range of identities and structural concerns.

Broadening the DEI Agenda (2000s–2010s)

By the early 2000s, the DEI agenda expanded to address a wider range of identities and issues, including gender, disability, sexuality, and age. Initiatives such as the United Kingdom's Athena SWAN Charter signaled institutional commitments to gender equality and later broadened to include race and disability (Chordiya and Protonentis, 2024). Universities in multiple national contexts began to adopt similar frameworks and to move from a narrow focus on access toward more holistic approaches that attend to campus climate, curriculum, and institutional culture (de Souza et al., 2023; Chordiya and Protonentis, 2024). During this period,

DEI principles also became more deeply embedded in institutional policies and professional expectations. This shift reflected a broader transition from voluntary and ad hoc diversity initiatives toward more formalized approaches that linked equity work to institutional accountability (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2005; Williams et al., 2005). Accrediting bodies and professional associations increasingly required evidence of DEI efforts in program evaluations, particularly in fields such as engineering, computing, and library and information science (García Holgado et al., 2023; Paterson et al., 2022). These developments indicate a transition from voluntary and ad hoc diversity initiatives toward more formalized and systemic approaches that tie equity work to external accountability and professional expectations. As DEI work matured, institutions increasingly recognized the need for senior leadership positions that could coordinate and drive equity efforts across complex organizational structures.

Emergence of the CDO Role

The emergence of the CDO role in the early 2000s is widely interpreted as a strategic response to the limits of earlier, fragmented diversity arrangements in higher education and other complex organizations (Harvey, 2014; Parker, 2019; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014). Rather than treating diversity work as an add-on or the responsibility of isolated programs, institutions began to locate formal responsibility for equity within senior leadership, signaling that inclusive excellence should be understood as a core organizational priority. This shift coincided with increasing demographic change, student and employee activism, and intensifying expectations for accountability in diversity outcomes, pushing institutions to adopt roles capable of coordinating cross-unit strategies rather than relying solely on diffuse efforts (Harvey, 2014; Parker, 2019; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

At a conceptual level, scholarship frames the CDO as a mechanism for institutionalizing inclusive excellence—embedding equity into mission, strategy, and assessment—rather than simply managing discrete initiatives (Harvey, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014). Authors emphasize that the logic of the role rests on three linked needs: legitimizing DEI work at the highest organizational levels, creating visible executive accountability for equity, and coordinating efforts across multiple units and functions that previously operated in silos (Harvey, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). The early diffusion of the CDO role in higher education thus reflects both symbolic and structural aspirations: the role is meant to communicate institutional commitment while providing an organizational platform for system-level change (Parker, 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). As CDO positions multiplied, professional associations moved to establish shared standards that could guide practice and signal the seriousness of the role.

Professionalization and Standards of Practice

As CDO roles expanded, professionalization quickly followed. The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) issued its Standards of Professional Practice in 2014 (updated as Standards 2.0), articulating expectations for CDO knowledge, competencies, and ethical practice (Worthington et al., 2014). These standards position CDOs as change agents responsible for embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion in institutional mission and strategic plans; catalyzing and evaluating organizational change; optimizing the balance between centralized and decentralized efforts; and ensuring accountability for equity outcomes across the institution (NADOHE, 2020; Worthington et al., 2014). The standards also acknowledge wide variation in backgrounds, structures, and resources, underscoring that CDO

practice must be adapted to local context while retaining core commitments to evidence-based, ethically grounded leadership (Worthington et al., 2014).

Parker (2019) and others argue that the normalization of the CDO role, combined with NADOHE's standards, reflects a broader governance trajectory in which diversity leadership is increasingly framed as a strategic function rather than peripheral service work (Parker, 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). This professionalization is not purely symbolic: it provides a reference point for institutional design, informs hiring and evaluation of CDOs, and offers guidance on how the role should interface with presidents, provosts, governing boards, and other senior leaders (Harvey, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014). Beyond shared standards, scholarship has also identified distinct organizational models that shape how CDOs exercise authority and influence within their institutions.

Organizational Models and Structural Configurations

The literature identifies several archetypal CDO configurations that shape authority, reporting lines, and access to resources. Williams and Wade-Golden first introduced a typology of CDO structures in their 2007 CUPA-HR Journal article and developed it more fully in their 2013 book, distinguishing among the collaborative officer configuration (emphasizing coordination and influence without extensive line authority), unit-based structures in which a central diversity office oversees specific programs, and portfolio-divisional models that grant broad authority across multiple units (Stanley, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013). These models vary in the degree of vertical authority, the extent of integration with the top management team, and the capacity to influence policy and resource decisions. Portfolio-divisional arrangements are often seen as offering the greatest potential for systemic change,

because they connect equity work directly to executive leadership and major decision arenas (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014).

At the same time, scholars note that organizational context—size, sector, culture, and governance traditions—strongly shapes which configuration is feasible and effective (Harvey, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Even within similar formal structures, informal networks, organizational norms, and relational power can significantly influence what CDOs are able to accomplish. Nixon's (2017) qualitative study of women of color CDOs illustrates this dynamic: even when formally positioned at senior levels, participants reported having their work questioned or invalidated by colleagues and navigating gendered and racialized expectations that constrained their effective authority. This attention to both formal and informal dimensions of structure highlight the importance of examining how CDO roles are actually embedded in decision-making routines, not just how they appear on organizational charts (Harvey, 2014; Nixon, 2017; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014). Although the CDO role is most extensively documented in higher education, similar leadership configurations have appeared across sectors, suggesting broader patterns in how organizations approach diversity governance.

Cross-Sector Diffusion and Transferable Logics

Although the CDO concept is most fully elaborated in higher education, similar leadership structures appear in corporate, healthcare, and public-sector organizations. Research on organizational leadership and public administration describes the appointment of senior diversity executives charged with coordinating DEI strategies and related organizational change initiatives, often in response to regulatory, reputational, workforce, or constituent pressures (Berman et al., 2020; Cooper & Gerlach, 2019; Hogan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2020). These roles

mirror higher education CDOs through their emphasis on cross-unit coordination, executive visibility, strategy implementation, and accountability for outcomes, while operating within distinct regulatory, professional, and market environments.

Cross-sector comparisons suggest that the institutionalization of CDO-like roles reflects a broader movement toward embedding diversity management within formal organizational governance rather than locating it solely within human resources or isolated compliance functions (Berman et al., 2020; Cooper & Gerlach, 2019; Harvey, 2014; Hogan et al., 2023; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). However, the authority, resources, budgetary control, and strategic influence associated with these roles vary considerably, echoing debates in higher education about the distinction between symbolic appointments and substantive capacity for organizational change (Harvey, 2014; Parker, 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). These variations across sectors and institutions raise important questions about the organizational conditions that allow CDO roles to facilitate meaningful change while avoiding primarily symbolic functions.

Conditions for Effectiveness and Risks of Symbolism

Across this literature, a recurring theme is that the mere existence of a CDO does not guarantee progress. Scholars argue that effectiveness depends on organizational commitment, adequate resourcing, alignment with institutional strategy, and careful attention to power dynamics and reporting structures (Harvey, 2014; Nixon, 2017; Parker, 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). Without clear mandates, meaningful budgets, and integration into core governance processes, the CDO role risks becoming primarily symbolic—used to signal commitment to external audiences while leaving underlying structures largely unchanged (Harvey, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014).

Professional standards explicitly warn against this risk by emphasizing that CDOs must be empowered to plan, catalyze, and assess institutional change, and that they should be positioned to influence mission, strategy, and resource allocation (Worthington et al., 2014). This guidance reflects a consensus that CDO roles are most effective when they are embedded in systems of accountability (e.g., linking equity metrics to strategic planning and budgeting) and when senior leaders treat DEI as integral to institutional success rather than a peripheral concern (Harvey, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014). While CDOs have emerged as central figures in DEI leadership, diversity committees have evolved alongside these executive roles as a complementary governance mechanism that distributes equity work across institutional levels.

Emergence and Significance of Diversity Committees

Diversity committees have emerged as one mechanism through which colleges and universities distribute responsibility for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion across institutional roles and units. These committees complement the work of chief diversity officers and centralized DEI offices by bringing together stakeholders who help shape and, in some cases, implement institutional diversity priorities (Holcombe et al., 2022; Leon & Williams, 2016; Williams, 2013). Their responsibilities may include strategic planning, campus needs assessment, climate assessment, policy review, programming, and oversight of institutional DEI initiatives (Holcombe et al., 2022; Leon & Williams, 2016). Their effectiveness depends on a clearly defined purpose, an appropriate scope of responsibility, representative membership, sustained leadership support, and connections to broader institutional strategies (Leon & Williams, 2016).

Diversity committees can also support shared equity leadership by connecting faculty, staff, students, and administrators across institutional levels. This broad participation can facilitate lateral coordination, widen institutional engagement, and strengthen the legitimacy of DEI priorities by involving multiple constituencies in planning and decision-making (Holcombe et al., 2022). Committees may begin as temporary task forces formed in response to a particular concern and later develop into standing bodies with continuing responsibilities. The transition to a permanent structure can signal that equity work has become an ongoing institutional responsibility rather than a temporary initiative (Holcombe et al., 2022; Leon & Williams, 2016). When connected to institutional planning and assessment processes, committees can also help monitor progress, communicate findings, and maintain attention to equity goals over time.

The scope, authority, and institutional influence of diversity committees vary considerably. Some committees have formal reporting relationships, access to resources, and meaningful opportunities to shape policy, while others remain advisory bodies whose recommendations depend on senior leaders for implementation (Bellamy et al., 2025; Leon & Williams, 2016). Research on academic-library EDI committees further demonstrates that unclear responsibilities, limited budgets, insufficient time, and restricted access to decision makers can undermine committee effectiveness and contribute to frustration among members (Bellamy et al., 2025). These conditions increase the risk that committees will function as symbolic demonstrations of institutional commitment rather than as structures capable of advancing organizational change.

Committee service can also place substantial labor demands on historically marginalized faculty and staff. Faculty of color are frequently expected to undertake additional mentoring, representation, and diversity-related service that receives limited recognition within institutional

evaluation and advancement systems (Trejo, 2020). Institutions can address this burden by providing protected time, workload adjustments, resources, transparent role expectations, and formal recognition of DEI leadership within evaluation, promotion, and tenure processes (Bellamy et al., 2025; Trejo, 2020).

Within an increasingly volatile legal and political environment, diversity committees may offer continuity, shared institutional knowledge, and cross-campus coordination. Their capacity to sustain meaningful work depends on genuine authority, access to resources, senior leadership support, and integration into institutional governance (Bellamy et al., 2025; Holcombe et al., 2022; Leon & Williams, 2016). These structures of CDO leadership and shared equity governance now operate within an external environment marked by intensified political and legal challenges to DEI work in U.S. higher education (Murray et al., 2023).

Contemporary Developments and Ongoing Challenges (2020s–Present)

The 2020s have brought intensified external sociopolitical pressure on DEI efforts in U.S. higher education, particularly at public institutions subject to state oversight (Follmer et al., 2024; Harper, 2025). Legislative and gubernatorial actions have restricted DEI offices and staff positions, mandatory diversity training, diversity statements, identity-conscious employment practices, and some forms of curricular content (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2025; Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025). Since 2023, multiple states have enacted laws or executive directives targeting DEI activities in public colleges and universities, often linking institutional funding, authority, or regulatory compliance to adherence to these restrictions (CSWE, 2025; Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025). These developments have created a fragmented national landscape in which DEI infrastructures have been eliminated, reconfigured, renamed, or subjected to

heightened oversight, with significant implications for staffing, programming, academic freedom, and student support (Cutler et al., n.d.; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025).

External pressures have also expanded through federal executive action, agency guidance, enforcement investigations, and political campaigns that characterize DEI practices as discriminatory or ideologically suspect. In 2025, Executive Order No. 14,173 directed federal agencies to address what the administration defined as illegal DEI practices among federal contractors and grant recipients, while guidance from the U.S. Department of Education asserted broad restrictions on the consideration of race in admissions, employment, scholarships, programming, and other institutional activities (Exec. Order No. 14,173, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). These directives prompted litigation concerning their scope, clarity, and constitutional implications and generated continuing uncertainty for colleges and universities receiving federal funding or holding federal contracts (*National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education v. Trump*, 2025). This federal posture strengthened political narratives centered on merit, neutrality, and colorblindness while increasing institutional concern that lawful equity strategies could attract investigation or financial consequences (Cecil, 2026; Harper, 2025).

Universities have responded to these pressures through varying combinations of compliance, adaptation, restructuring, and resistance. Institutional responses have included closing or renaming DEI offices, relocating equity-related functions within student success or academic affairs portfolios, revising program eligibility requirements, and altering the language used to describe courses, research, and campus initiatives (Cutler et al., n.d.; Goldberg, 2024). Empirical research has found that institutions in states with anti-DEI laws experienced greater odds of losing formal DEI offices between 2020 and 2024. At the same time, students in these

states continued to create and sustain racially focused student organizations, demonstrating that the reduction of formal institutional infrastructure can generate new forms of student organizing and collective response (Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that visible organizational change does not always reveal whether underlying equity work has ended, migrated to other units, or continued through faculty, staff, and student networks.

These strategies carry uneven consequences for campus communities. Reorganization and changes in language may allow institutions to preserve selected forms of student support while reducing their exposure to political scrutiny. They can also weaken transparency, create ambiguity about institutional commitments, and shift responsibility for equity work onto individuals and informal networks with fewer resources or protections (Dhanani et al., 2024; Goldberg, 2024; Pedota et al., 2025). Faculty and staff whose identities or scholarship are closely connected to equity issues may experience these pressures most directly, particularly when institutional leaders provide limited guidance or public support.

Empirical research documents significant effects on teaching, scholarship, professional well-being, and campus climate. Goldberg's (2024) mixed-method study of LGBTQ+ faculty found that participants exercised increased caution in their teaching and research, altered course content and language, experienced heightened concerns about visibility and institutional censure, and considered relocating or leaving higher education. Pedota et al. (2025) similarly found that faculty facing proposed legislative restrictions engaged in self-censorship and modified their teaching and research despite the presence of academic freedom protections. Together, these studies demonstrate how political and legal uncertainty can narrow academic activity beyond the formal requirements of enacted policies (Goldberg, 2024; Pedota et al., 2025).

Public opinion adds another layer of complexity. National polling indicates that many voters support principles associated with diversity, equal opportunity, belonging, and targeted student support while also expressing concerns about perceived preferences, ideological imbalance, and the relationship between DEI and merit (Cecil, 2026). Institutions therefore navigate conflicting demands from legislators, federal agencies, donors, accreditors, students, employees, and the broader public. These competing expectations create a contested legitimacy environment in which DEI leaders must communicate the educational and institutional purposes of equity work while responding to evolving legal and political constraints (Cecil, 2026; Harper, 2025).

Taken together, the literature indicates that U.S. colleges and universities operate in a high-stakes environment in which external sociopolitical forces constrain formal DEI structures and influence what institutions perceive as teachable, fundable, and strategically sustainable. Governance design, legal literacy, evidence-based decision-making, and strategic communication have therefore become increasingly central to maintaining equity work amid uncertainty (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025; Follmer et al., 2024; Harper, 2025; Pedota et al., 2025).

To this point, the chapter has traced how DEI has expanded, encountered resistance, and evolved in response to broader sociopolitical forces across U.S. higher education. These external dynamics operate on campuses through institutional structures, cultures, and leadership arrangements that shape what DEI leaders can accomplish. The next section turns inward to examine how external pressures interact with internal governance, resource distribution, and organizational norms to influence CDO effectiveness and the durability of equity work.

Institutional Contexts: External Pressures, Internal Dynamics, and CDO Effectiveness

Building on the historical context, scholarship increasingly locates CDO effectiveness within the institutional conditions surrounding the role rather than primarily within the individual characteristics of the person occupying it. Reporting relationships, decision-making authority, access to senior leaders, staffing, budgets, and integration into institutional governance shape whether CDOs can influence organizational priorities and sustain equity initiatives over time (Harvey, 2014; Leon, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014). External anti-DEI pressures can make these internal arrangements especially visible by exposing the extent to which institutional commitments are embedded within policies, systems, and resource decisions.

The growth of CDO positions signals recognition that diversity and equity require senior leadership, yet institutions frequently establish these roles without making corresponding changes to authority or governance. CDOs may receive broad mandates while operating with limited staff, restricted budgets, ambiguous decision rights, and uneven access to institutional planning processes (Harvey, 2014; Leon, 2014; Stanley et al., 2019). These constraints are particularly consequential in decentralized institutions where academic and administrative units retain substantial autonomy. Under these conditions, equity initiatives can remain fragmented and dependent on individual relationships, temporary funding, or the priorities of a particular president or provost.

Institutional culture further shapes how formal structures operate. Colleges and universities may publicly affirm diversity while maintaining policies, routines, and definitions of excellence that preserve existing distributions of power (del Río & Loggins, 2019; Liera & Desir, 2023). Mission statements, strategic plans, and public communications can convey support for equity without corresponding changes to budgeting, hiring, promotion, curriculum, or

accountability. This gap resembles what Wilton et al. (2020) describe as diversity dishonesty, in which organizational representations of commitment exceed the material conditions experienced by members of historically marginalized groups.

The distinction between symbolic affirmation and substantive commitment becomes especially significant during periods of political pressure. CDOs may be expected to sustain public confidence in institutional values while receiving limited backing for structural change. Meaningful support therefore requires more than the existence of a diversity office. It requires clear authority, durable resources, senior leadership engagement, and shared responsibility across organizational units (Liera & Desir, 2023; Stanley et al., 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). These conditions shape how CDOs interpret external threats and determine which strategic responses remain available to them.

Strategic Adaptations: Rebranding, Decentralization, Delayed Action, and Resistance

Recent institutional responses to anti-DEI pressure follow recognizable patterns. Grim et al. (2025) identify strategic inaction, strategic proaction, and strategic reaction as approaches used by CDOs and institutions navigating political and legal uncertainty. Strategic inaction involves deliberately pausing, delaying, or limiting visible action while assessing risk. Strategic proaction involves anticipating threats and altering structures, language, or coalitions before formal restrictions take effect. Strategic reaction occurs when institutions respond after legislation, executive action, governing-board intervention, or public controversy has already created an immediate institutional demand.

These categories are fluid rather than mutually exclusive. An institution may temporarily pause a public initiative while moving equity-related responsibilities into other units, revising language, consulting legal counsel, or developing new coalitions. Rebranding can include

replacing highly politicized terminology with language centered on belonging, access, institutional effectiveness, or student success. Structural adaptation may include relocating functions, distributing responsibilities across academic and student affairs units, or embedding equity goals within accreditation, assessment, and strategic planning processes (Grim et al., 2025).

These adaptations can preserve important work, but their effects depend on institutional design. Decentralization may broaden responsibility and reduce reliance on one office, particularly when equity goals are incorporated into multiple units and governance processes. It can also weaken coordination and accountability when responsibilities are dispersed without common expectations, assessment systems, or centralized support (Holcombe et al., 2022). Similarly, changes in terminology may provide political protection while allowing substantive work to continue, or they may signal institutional retreat and obscure accountability.

Strategic inaction should therefore be distinguished from simple passivity. Delayed action can provide time to interpret ambiguous policies, learn from peer institutions, and protect programs from premature elimination. Extended delay can also normalize retrenchment, weaken trust, and allow political opponents to define the boundaries of permissible action. The consequences depend on whether delay supports a longer-term strategy or substitutes indefinitely for institutional decision-making.

Institutional communication represents another area of adaptation. Casellas Connors and McCoy (2022) demonstrate that colleges and universities may respond to racial crises through public language that signals antiracist commitment while leaving underlying organizational practices intact. Public statements and revised terminology carry limited transformative value when they remain disconnected from policy, governance, and resource allocation.

Organizational-change scholarship similarly suggests that communication must be accompanied by coalition building, institutionalized procedures, and sustained leadership action if change is to endure (Kuffuor et al., 2024).

Together, strategic inaction, proaction, and reaction illuminate the ways institutional self-protection, political calculation, and equity commitments intersect. Rebranding, decentralization, delay, and resistance are not inherently progressive or regressive. Their significance depends on whether they protect and deepen equity work or merely reduce its visibility and institutional influence.

Organizational Culture and Leadership Dynamics

Across leadership behavior strongly shapes whether equity work becomes embedded within institutional operations. Presidents, provosts, governing boards, and senior leadership teams communicate their priorities through reporting structures, resource allocation, policy decisions, and their willingness to defend equity initiatives during periods of controversy. Public support carries limited institutional force when leaders leave CDOs without the authority or resources required to fulfill expansive mandates (Stanley et al., 2019; Worthington et al., 2014).

This mismatch between expectations and institutional capacity can create structural fragility. CDOs may be held accountable for campus climate, workforce diversity, student belonging, compliance, education, and organizational change while lacking authority over the units responsible for hiring, curriculum, budgeting, admissions, or faculty evaluation. Such arrangements position CDOs as institution-wide problem solvers while preserving decision-making authority elsewhere.

Shared equity leadership offers an alternative to locating responsibility within one individual or office. This approach distributes responsibility among senior leaders, faculty, staff,

students, and unit-level administrators while maintaining coordination, accountability, and professional equity leadership (Holcombe et al., 2022). Shared responsibility should supplement rather than replace the authority of the CDO. Without formal coordination and accountability, distributed leadership can become a rationale for dispersing responsibility so broadly that no individual or unit remains answerable for outcomes.

An equity-minded organization also examines the institutional policies and routines that produce unequal conditions rather than relying primarily on interpersonal training or individual goodwill (Liera & Desir, 2023). This orientation places responsibility on the organization to assess hiring, advancement, curriculum, resource distribution, student support, and decision-making processes. It also requires attention to the emotional labor associated with equity leadership. CDOs and other DEI leaders frequently absorb institutional anxiety, community harm, and conflict while being expected to remain composed, strategic, and available to others. Institutional support must therefore include attention to workload, professional protection, peer networks, and emotional sustainability (Ueda et al., 2024).

Faculty and Staff Dynamics: Resistance and Allyship

Faculty and staff play a central role in either reinforcing or challenging the organizational conditions surrounding equity work. Resistance to DEI initiatives is frequently expressed through language concerning merit, neutrality, fairness, academic freedom, or institutional mission. Research on opposition to DEI suggests that resistance can emerge when members of advantaged groups perceive threats to resources, status, identity, or the moral standing of their group (Gündemir et al., 2024; Iyer, 2022). These concerns may be articulated as principled objections even when they function to protect existing distributions of recognition and authority.

Within higher education, resistance can shape curriculum decisions, faculty hiring, promotion and tenure standards, committee work, and responses to student demands. It may also operate through procedural delay, demands for repeated evidence, or the treatment of equity-related scholarship as less rigorous or less central to academic mission. These practices show that resistance is not limited to overt opposition. It can be reproduced through ordinary organizational routines and ostensibly neutral evaluative standards.

Faculty and staff allies can provide a countervailing source of institutional change. Allyship may include revising curricula, mentoring historically marginalized students and colleagues, advocating for equitable hiring and evaluation practices, challenging exclusionary norms, and using positional influence to support institutional reforms (Hanasono et al., 2022; Ro et al., 2023). Effective allyship requires sustained action and accountability rather than self-identification alone. It also requires attention to how privilege and institutional position affect an individual's ability to take risks, influence peers, and absorb resistance.

The development of ally capacity can extend the reach of formal DEI leadership, but institutions should avoid shifting uncompensated equity labor onto a small group of committed faculty and staff. Equity-related service should receive workload recognition, resources, and meaningful consideration within evaluation and advancement processes. These structures help transform allyship from isolated individual effort into a durable component of institutional responsibility.

Building Sustainable Cross-Campus Coalitions

Cross-campus coalitions can distribute responsibility for equity work across faculty, staff, students, administrators, and institutional units. Such coalitions are particularly important in decentralized institutions where no single leader controls all the systems that shape campus

climate and organizational opportunity. Shared structures can connect equity priorities to academic affairs, student affairs, human resources, enrollment management, institutional research, advancement, and governance (Holcombe et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2019).

Effective coalitions require more than broad participation. Their design should clarify who holds decision-making authority, how recommendations move into policy, how resources are allocated, and how progress is assessed. Representation also requires attention to power. Including historically marginalized participants does not create shared governance when those participants have limited influence over agendas, decisions, or implementation.

Research on systemic institutional change emphasizes the importance of multilevel strategies that connect individual participation with formal policies, leadership commitment, data, incentives, and accountability (Laursen & Austin, 2020). Coalitions become more durable when their work is embedded in strategic plans, assessment systems, budget processes, and governance structures. They remain vulnerable when they depend entirely on volunteer labor, temporary funding, or the support of one senior leader.

Faculty, staff, and student advocates can also translate lived experience into institutional analysis and action. Espino and Ariza (2022), for example, show how student affairs professionals can use their organizational positions to challenge institutional bias and advocate for equity. Such advocacy is strengthened when institutions create formal channels through which concerns can influence policy and resource decisions.

Cross-campus coalitions do not eliminate the need for centralized leadership. Rather, they can create a structure in which the CDO provides coordination, expertise, and strategic direction while responsibility for implementation extends across the institution. This combination of

centralized capacity and distributed ownership can reduce the isolation of CDOs and make equity initiatives less dependent on a single office or individual.

Impact of Anti-DEI Retrenchment on Campus Climate, Belonging, and Community

Anti-DEI retrenchment affects more than organizational charts, office names, and program structures. It communicates institutional messages about whose identities, scholarship, and experiences remain worthy of recognition and support. The elimination or weakening of equity structures can generate uncertainty about whether previous institutional commitments were durable or conditional.

Faculty and staff whose work or identities are closely connected to equity initiatives may experience heightened vulnerability, self-censorship, and concern about institutional support. Research documents how political restrictions and institutional uncertainty can alter teaching, scholarship, professional expression, and decisions about whether to remain at an institution or within a state (Goldberg, 2024; Pedota et al., 2025). Dhanani et al. (2024) further emphasize that the burdens of DEI restrictions are distributed unevenly, with members of historically marginalized groups often carrying the greatest personal and professional consequences.

Testimonies arising from anti-DEI actions also describe harm, refusal, organizing, and efforts to preserve community under restrictive conditions (Nuñez-Janes et al., 2025). These responses demonstrate that retrenchment does not automatically eliminate equity work. It can shift that work into informal networks, student organizations, disciplinary associations, or relationships among faculty and staff. Such movement may preserve community, but it can also place greater responsibility on individuals with fewer resources and protections.

For CDOs, the consequences are both structural and relational. They must interpret rapidly changing external conditions while responding to fear, anger, grief, and uncertainty

within campus communities. Their effectiveness depends partly on their ability to maintain trust and communicate institutional direction, but institutions cannot assign responsibility for repairing community harm to the CDO alone. Senior leaders must provide clear guidance, material support, and visible accountability.

The emotional labor involved in navigating these conditions is substantial. Equity leaders may be expected to support community members, advise senior leaders, interpret policy, respond to public controversy, and preserve institutional confidence simultaneously. Sustainable equity leadership therefore requires structures that protect the well-being and professional standing of those carrying this work (Ueda et al., 2024).

Sustaining Equity Leadership: Counter Narratives, Identity Work, and Hope

Scholarship on counter-narratives, leadership identity, and critical hope offers conceptual resources for understanding how equity-oriented leaders sustain their commitments under conditions of resistance. These literatures are broader than the empirical research specifically focused on CDOs, but they help explain how leaders maintain meaning, agency, and direction within contested institutions.

Counter-narratives challenge dominant accounts that portray inequity as an individual problem or characterize equity work as divisive, unnecessary, or incompatible with institutional excellence. Critical race scholarship positions counter-storytelling as a means of centering knowledge that dominant institutional narratives exclude or minimize (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For equity leaders, counter-narratives can preserve the legitimacy of lived experience, expose contradictions between institutional rhetoric and practice, and connect present conflicts to longer histories of resistance and institutional change.

Research on transformative leaders of color similarly illustrates how counter-narratives can support resistance, consciousness, and praxis within organizations (Montevirgen, 2011). These narratives do more than describe harm. They can provide an interpretive framework through which leaders identify structural patterns, affirm their commitments, and imagine alternative institutional possibilities.

Identity work offers another lens for understanding sustainability. Leaders whose identities or values conflict with dominant organizational expectations may engage in continuous efforts to construct and protect a coherent professional identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Equity leaders often navigate tensions between institutional membership and institutional critique, balancing expectations of loyalty, diplomacy, advocacy, and accountability. Critical approaches to leadership identity development emphasize that leadership identities are produced through relationships, power structures, and social context rather than through individual attributes alone (Chunoo & Torres, 2023).

Critical hope provides an affective and ethical orientation for continuing this work. It differs from optimism that minimizes harm or assumes that progress will occur naturally. Duncan-Andrade (2009) describes critical hope as grounded in material conditions, shared struggle, and a willingness to confront suffering directly. Bishundat et al. (2018) similarly connect critical hope to leadership development that acknowledges injustice while sustaining collective possibility and action.

Within equity leadership, critical hope can support persistence without requiring leaders to deny exhaustion, anger, grief, or institutional failure. It directs those emotions toward analysis, solidarity, and purposeful action. Counter-narratives identify and challenge dominant

explanations, identity work helps leaders maintain coherence amid contradictory demands, and critical hope sustains engagement with the possibility of change.

Together, these perspectives offer an integrated framework for understanding how equity leaders sustain themselves and their commitments. Institutions can support this work by creating leadership-development spaces centered on positionality and lived experience, legitimizing counter-narratives as sources of organizational knowledge, providing protected communities of practice, and coupling hopeful language with material accountability. These practices help ensure that hope does not become a substitute for structural change but instead supports the long-term work required to achieve it.

Overall, the literature suggests that the future of equity work in higher education depends on more than persuasive messaging or the competencies of individual leaders. It depends on whether institutions align their stated values with governance, resources, accountability, and institutional courage. These dynamics involve power, meaning-making, organizational behavior, and strategic adaptation. The theoretical frameworks in the next section provide the lenses needed to examine what CDOs encounter, how they interpret those encounters, and how they respond within racialized and politically contested institutions.

Theoretical Foundations and Frameworks

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines four complementary perspectives: critical race theory as applied to education (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), political astuteness theory (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019), and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995; Helms Mills et al., 2010). Viewed together, these theories offer a layered way of

examining how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment in higher education, with each contributing a form of analysis that the others do not replace.

I conceptualize this framework as four nested circles, with critical race theory forming the outer circle and providing the evaluative ground by naming racism as structural and endemic, situating institutional behavior within histories of racial retrenchment, attending to how race intersects with other axes of identity, treating narratives from the margins as a form of knowledge, and requiring that institutional claims to neutrality, fairness, and progress be assessed against this history rather than taken at face value (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Within that outer circle, three CRT concepts are operationalized as the primary analytic tools of this study. Endemic racism names the conditions CDOs navigate as durable structural features of educational institutions rather than contingent political developments. Interest convergence explains the logic through which institutional commitments to equity become conditional and reversible when alignment with dominant-group interests weakens. Counter-storytelling establishes the epistemological warrant for treating CDO narratives as authoritative knowledge about what equity work requires and costs rather than as anecdotal accounts to be weighed against institutional versions of events. These three concepts travel across all layers of the framework and are taken up in each of the subsections that follow.

Racialized organizations theory provides institutional specificity by identifying mechanisms through which racial hierarchy is reproduced, including resource distribution, rule coding, and hegemonic whiteness (Ray, 2019), while political astuteness theory explains how CDOs act within these racialized and contested environments by naming the competencies that allow them to read power, build alliances, and move strategically under constraint (Hartley et al.,

2015; Hartley et al., 2019). At the center sits sensemaking theory, which focuses on how CDOs construct meaning from their experiences and aligns closely with interpretative phenomenological analysis because of its emphasis on lived experience and interpretation (Weick, 1995). This study applies sensemaking through the additional lens of critical sensemaking, as developed by Helms Mills et al., (2010), which extends Weick's framework by foregrounding the role of power, identity, and positionality in shaping whose interpretations circulate and whose achieve credibility within organizations. This extension is necessary here because CDOs are not making sense of neutral organizational ambiguity; they are interpreting racialized institutional conditions from racially positioned standpoints, and that distinction has analytic consequences that Weick's original framework alone does not fully capture. The subsections that follow define each theory, identify the tenets, concepts, and mechanisms, and explain how each lens connects to the research question and to CDO experience.

Critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)

Critical race theory (CRT) serves as the overarching framework for interrogating how race and racism structure social life, including higher education, and for evaluating whether institutional operations are just even when described in neutral terms (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Foundational work by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), Bell (1992), Crenshaw (1989), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), and Solórzano and Yosso (2002) provides conceptual and methodological tools for examining how policies and practices reproduce racial inequities. More recently, Patton (2016) extends this foundation to postsecondary contexts specifically, arguing that higher education institutions are not incidental sites of racial inequity but rather active participants in reproducing White supremacy through ordinary, taken-for-granted

practices, what she calls the "prose" of postsecondary life. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) further ground this framework methodologically, documenting how CRT scholarship in education has developed tools to engage with and work against the material, structural, and ideological mechanisms of White supremacy rather than simply naming race as a variable. In this study, CRT functions as both an explanatory lens and a normative standard, situating CDOs' experiences within broader histories of racialization and retrenchment rather than treating them as isolated conflicts or individual failures.

Three CRT concepts carry the primary analytic weight in this study: endemic racism, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling. These are not selected arbitrarily; they are operationalized here because they correspond most directly to the conditions CDOs navigate, the institutional logic that governs institutional retreat from equity commitments, and the epistemological status this study grants to CDO testimony. The discussion below introduces all five CRT tenets that inform the framework, with particular attention to the three that are most directly operationalized in the analysis.

The first tenet is the endemic, structural nature of racism, which holds that race and racism are durable features of social systems and deeply embedded within institutions rather than episodic deviations that can be resolved through individual goodwill or isolated interventions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In education specifically, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) show how racism structures access to resources, shapes curricular priorities, and allocates opportunity across the system. Patton (2016) extends this argument in postsecondary contexts, arguing that the ordinary operations of higher education, including curriculum, policy, research, and access, function as instruments of racial reproduction even when they carry no explicit racial intent. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) reinforce this point by

showing that CRT scholarship must engage not only with visible racial harm but with the structural and ideological mechanisms through which racism is normalized and maintained across educational institutions. This tenet rests on the further premise that racial categories are themselves socially constructed, produced and maintained through meaning, institutional practice, and political struggle rather than biology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Universities therefore do not simply respond to static demographics, since they participate in making race consequential through everyday operations. In this study, the endemic nature of racism is operationalized as an analytic lens that refuses to treat anti-DEI pressure as an aberration or a passing political moment and instead positions such pressure as one expression of a durable structure that has always worked to contain and roll back racial equity initiatives.

The second tenet is interest convergence, which Bell (1992) advances to argue that advances in racial equity typically occur when they align with the interests of dominant groups and retreat when that alignment weakens. This concept is operationalized directly in this study. From this perspective, institutional progress on racial equity reflects shifting calculations about whose interests are served rather than straightforward moral growth, and this tenet is visible in CDO accounts in which institutions express strong public commitments to DEI but pull back when equity work introduces political risk, threatens donor relationships, or generates friction with powerful constituencies. Descriptions of initiatives that are softened, delayed, or abandoned under scrutiny exemplify the pattern Bell (1992) describes. Interest convergence is operationalized here as the explanatory mechanism that accounts for why institutional support for CDO work is conditional and reversible, not because leaders necessarily lack genuine commitment, but because organizational interests and dominant-group calculations constrain what institutions are willing to protect when the political cost of equity work rises.

The third tenet is intersectionality, as theorized by Crenshaw (1989), which extends the structural account by showing how race intersects with gender, class, sexuality, and other identities to generate distinct and compounding forms of marginalization. This is analytically important in this study because CDOs occupy varied racial, gendered, and professional positions, and their exposure to risk and constraint is shaped by those intersections, so a single-axis analysis would miss important differences in how participants experience anti-DEI pressure.

The fourth tenet is counter-storytelling, advanced by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), which holds that the narratives of those at the margins constitute critical knowledge. Counter-stories do more than add missing perspectives, since they reveal that seemingly neutral institutional narratives are partial and interested and often invested in maintaining racial hierarchies. Counter-storytelling is operationalized in this study as both a methodological commitment and a theoretical claim. Methodologically, it justifies treating CDO accounts as authoritative sources of knowledge rather than anecdotal supplements to policy analysis. In this study, CDO accounts are exactly the kinds of narratives institutional life tends to soften or sideline, including stories about the cost of equity work, the retreat of institutional commitment under pressure, and the interior labor required to sustain both the work and the self. Treating these narratives as central aligns with CRT's insistence that experiential knowledge is indispensable for understanding and contesting racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Theoretically, counter-storytelling establishes that the analytic findings of this study are not simply individual experiences but contributions to a growing body of knowledge about what structural racism requires from, and costs, those charged with contesting it inside institutions.

The fifth tenet is the critique of liberalism and colorblindness, which holds that neutral principles, formal equality, and incrementalism cannot address inequality embedded in

institutional structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This tenet is analytically important in this study because the institutional environments CDOs navigate are saturated with appeals to neutrality, merit, and viewpoint balance, and these appeals often function not as the absence of a racial position but as the active enforcement of one. CDO accounts of being asked to soften language, avoid the appearance of "illegal DEI," or reframe equity work in race-neutral terms exemplify the pattern this tenet names, since the institution treats colorblind formalism as the safe default while treating equity work as the deviation requiring justification. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) note that CRT scholarship in education has consistently shown how colorblindness and appeals to meritocracy function as ideological tools that reproduce White supremacy under the cover of neutral principle, and CDO experiences in this study reflect that dynamic precisely.

In combination, these tenets position the challenges CDOs face within long histories of racial retrenchment and organizational maintenance rather than casting them as idiosyncratic institutional failures (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Endemic racism, operationalized as a persistent structural condition rather than a contingent political climate, situates the environments CDOs navigate as durable features of educational systems that precede and will outlast any particular legislative moment. Interest convergence, operationalized as the mechanism that explains why institutional retreats follow a predictable logic rather than representing random failures of will, clarifies the structural reasoning behind institutional retreat. Intersectionality helps explain why these conditions do not operate identically across participants. Counter-storytelling, operationalized as both an epistemic claim and a methodological warrant, underscores the importance of CDO narratives as sources of knowledge about what equity work requires and costs. The critique of liberalism names why the colorblind

framings CDOs are pressured to adopt cannot resolve the conditions they are positioned to confront (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Within the larger framework, CRT provides the evaluative ground by naming racism as structural and keeping questions of justice central even when institutional practices are described in neutral, technical, or procedural language (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015), and racialized organizations theory, described next, sharpens this critique by specifying how these structural dynamics are enacted inside universities.

Theory of Racialized Organizations (Victor Ray, 2019)

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations provides a framework for understanding how racial inequality is built into organizational structures rather than appended onto otherwise neutral entities. The theory identifies four mechanisms through which racial hierarchy is produced and maintained. These are the enhancement or diminishment of racial groups' agency, the legitimate distribution of resources along racial lines, the racial coding of organizational rules and practices, and hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential. The theory challenges assumptions that organizations are race-neutral and has proven useful for examining resistance to DEI and the barriers CDOs encounter when they seek transformative change (Douglas et al., 2023; Lee and Tapia, 2021).

The first mechanism, the enhancement or diminishment of racial groups' agency, names how organizations shape what different groups can do, access, and accomplish through embedded racial logics that often go unacknowledged but powerfully structure institutional life (Ray, 2019). It draws attention away from individual competence and toward organizational

patterns that expand or contract the range of action available to members based on racial positioning.

The second mechanism, the legitimate distribution of resources along racial lines, highlights how authority, funding, opportunities, and credibility are allocated in ways that reflect and reinforce racial hierarchy rather than neutral organizational need (Ray, 2019). Over time, these distributions create differential access to institutional support that shapes what becomes possible for different actors and what remains structurally out of reach regardless of title or effort.

The third mechanism, the racial coding of organizational rules and practices, describes how ostensibly neutral processes and policies are shaped by racialized norms and expectations (Ray, 2019). This coding enables a gap between formal rules and everyday practice and allows institutions to espouse equity at the level of policy while reproducing racial disparities in day-to-day operations through selective enforcement and the privileging of familiar cultural styles.

The fourth mechanism, hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential, explains how whiteness functions as an unmarked standard for competence, authority, and leadership fitness, thereby stabilizing racial dominance (Ray, 2019). This mechanism helps explain why leadership styles and communication practices associated with whiteness are treated as normative while others are viewed as deficient.

This study draws on racialized organizations theory because the institutional conditions participants describe map closely onto these mechanisms. The diminishment of CDO agency appears in the gap between formal authority and what institutions will actually resource and protect, a gap that reflects the organization's racial architecture rather than individual failure (Liera, 2019; Leon, 2014). Racialized resource distributions show up in the misalignment

between the ambitious equity agendas assigned to CDOs and the staffing, budget, and authority they receive (Suarez et al., 2018; Wilson, 2013). Racial coding is visible in the decoupling between equity policies and daily practice that Douglas et al. (2023) identify as a defining feature of CDO environments. Hegemonic whiteness appears in informal credentialing processes that determine whose expertise is treated as authoritative and whose leadership is regarded as provisional (Lee and Tapia, 2021).

Understanding organizations as racialized clarifies why equity-focused leaders require more than moral commitment to advance their work. Institutions structured to reproduce racial hierarchy through resources, rules, and whiteness demand leaders who can read power, build coalitions, and act strategically within conditions they did not create and cannot alter through goodwill alone. Political astuteness theory speaks directly to that strategic work.

Political Astuteness Theory (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019)

Political astuteness theory (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019) provides the strategic layer of this conceptual framework by accounting for the deliberate agency CDOs exercise as they respond to the structural and organizational conditions illuminated by critical race theory and racialized organizations theory. Those frameworks clarify the conditions participants must navigate, while political astuteness theory clarifies the forms of strategic action they use to move within those conditions. Hartley et al. (2015) conceptualize political astuteness as a cluster of interrelated skills that enable leaders to work effectively across formal authority structures and informal political dynamics. Hartley et al. (2019) extend that argument by positioning political astuteness as a bridge between leadership practice and the creation of public value, emphasizing that the capacity to discern interests, build alignment, and foster coalitions under conditions of contestation is central to producing outcomes that serve the broader good.

Although political astuteness theory emerged from research based primarily in the United Kingdom and was not developed as a higher education theory, it offers a useful vocabulary for interpreting the strategic work participants described. Its value in this study lies in its attention to how leaders read power, build alliances, and advance priorities under conditions of ambiguity and constraint, even as those dynamics take shape differently in U.S. higher education. That distinction matters because the governance structures, institutional traditions, and political pressures that shape American colleges and universities are not identical to those that informed the theory's original development. Even so, the participants in this study described forms of strategic labor that closely align with the theory's central concerns, which makes it a productive framework for interpreting how CDOs navigated contested environments while continuing to advance equity work.

Within Hartley et al.'s (2015) framework, personal skills refer to the self-awareness, emotional regulation, and reflective discipline that allow leaders to act intentionally in high stakes environments. For CDOs, these capacities matter because the work is institutionally demanding and personally implicating, especially for leaders whose identities are bound up with the communities most affected by institutional harm. Interpersonal skills encompass listening, empathy, and persuasive communication, which allow leaders to build trust across differences of race, rank, ideology, and role. In the context of CDO work, where effectiveness often depends on maintaining relationships with skeptical administrators, resistant faculty, and vulnerable students, interpersonal skill becomes a central medium through which political work is carried.

Reading people and situations refers to the capacity to discern formal and informal power, competing interests, organizational vulnerability, and shifting alliances within a given context (Hartley et al., 2015). This competency is especially important for CDOs, who must

continually assess which actors can actually protect initiatives, which forms of support are durable, and which expressions of commitment remain largely symbolic. Building alignment and alliances moves from that awareness into coordinated action, as leaders cultivate shared purpose and relational networks that can sustain equity efforts through political shifts, leadership turnover, and institutional resistance (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019). Strategic direction and scanning extend that work further by emphasizing environmental monitoring, long range orientation, and calibrated timing, so that leaders can sequence action in ways that remain viable within changing political conditions.

Within this study, political astuteness becomes visible when participants describe deliberate tactical choices made under constraint. Reading people and situations, building alignment and alliances, and strategic direction and scanning hold particular importance because these were the capacities participants most often described when they talked about decoding administrative signals, identifying coalition partners who could share or absorb risk, and sequencing interventions carefully enough to avoid triggering institutional retreat. Personal and interpersonal skills appear throughout the findings as enabling conditions that made this strategic work possible, since participants often had to regulate themselves under pressure, maintain credibility across strained relationships, and communicate in ways that preserved both trust and feasibility. Political astuteness theory therefore helps illuminate how CDOs acted within racialized organizations and hostile political environments while keeping structural critique and leadership practice analytically connected.

This framework is especially useful because it clarifies that participants' strategic action did not arise in the abstract and did not operate apart from the institutional conditions already described. Their decisions about when to speak, when to reframe, whom to involve, what to

protect, and how to move the work forward were shaped by the same organizational constraints that critical race theory and racialized organizations theory help name. Political astuteness therefore adds an important layer to this study by explaining how participants exercised judgment, timing, and coalition-based action within settings that constrained authority and redistributed risk unevenly. Sensemaking theory, described next, turns to the interpretive processes that underlie those strategic choices and shows how participants made meaning of the environments they were required to read, endure, and navigate.

Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995)

Sensemaking theory, as developed by Weick (1995), offers a conceptual foundation for understanding how individuals construct meaning from ambiguous, disruptive, or rapidly shifting circumstances. In this framework it functions as the innermost circle and the interpretive engine beneath the structural and strategic logics the other theories provide. Where CRT assesses racial power and complicity, racialized organizations theory explains how inequity is reproduced in organizational form, and political astuteness theory accounts for strategic competencies under constraint, sensemaking theory explains the continuous meaning-making through which CDOs interpret and act in these conditions.

However, Weick's (1995) original framework has been critiqued for insufficient attention to power and context, that is, for treating sensemaking as a relatively neutral cognitive process without fully accounting for the ways in which structural inequalities shape whose interpretations circulate, whose accounts achieve plausibility, and who bears the interpretive burden of making sense of conditions they did not create. Helms Mills et al., (2010) develop critical sensemaking as a corrective to this gap, arguing that sensemaking is always situated within power relations and that analyses of meaning-making must account for how identity, positionality, and

organizational power shape what individuals notice, how they interpret it, and whose sense-making is treated as authoritative. This extension is directly relevant to the current study. CDOs in this study were not interpreting ambiguous institutional signals from a position of neutral organizational membership; they were making sense of conditions structured by race and racism, often from positions of relative vulnerability within predominantly white institutions. Critical sensemaking foregrounds this dynamic explicitly, providing the conceptual vocabulary to examine not just how participants made meaning, but how their interpretations were shaped by, and had to navigate against, racialized organizational power.

Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as an ongoing, socially situated process rather than a single cognitive event. He identifies seven properties that characterize it. These are identity construction, retrospective sensemaking, enactment, social or collective sensemaking, its ongoing character, extracted cues, and a focus on plausibility over accuracy. Identity construction establishes that sensemaking begins from who the actor understands themselves to be. Self-understanding shapes what they notice, what they experience as threatening, and which responses feel available. For CDOs, professional identity is tightly linked to personal commitments to equity and justice, and many occupy positions at the intersection of institutional authority and marginalized communities. Critical sensemaking adds a further dimension here: for CDOs whose racial and professional identities are bound up with the communities most harmed by institutional failures, identity construction is not a neutral anchor for interpretation but a site where the costs of institutional racism are registered first and most acutely (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010).

Retrospective sensemaking captures the temporal dimension, since actors construct understanding by looking back and fitting experiences into familiar stories. CDOs draw on

institutional histories and prior encounters with racialized conflict to interpret new signals. Enactment holds that actors participate in creating the environments they seek to understand through the ways they notice, name, and respond to events (Weick, 1995). When CDOs reframe institutional narratives or calibrate their language in response to political pressure, they are shaping the field of what can be said and done rather than simply reacting to fixed conditions. Social sensemaking acknowledges that interpretation is shared and contested through conversation and relationships. Critical sensemaking extends this point by emphasizing that power shapes whose interpretations carry authority and whose are dismissed or discredited, a dynamic with clear implications for CDOs in predominantly white institutions where their interpretations of racial harm may be treated as personal, political, or excessive rather than as accurate organizational diagnoses (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010). The ongoing character of sensemaking highlights that interpretation is never finished; CDOs continually revise their accounts as new legislation, institutional decisions, and public discourses emerge (Parry, 2003). Extracted cues refer to the specific signals actors treat as meaningful, such as changes in budget language, shifting public statements, or subtle changes in leadership tone, all of which CDOs must track and interpret simultaneously (Marchiondo et al., 2023). Plausibility over accuracy captures the pragmatic nature of this work. Actors rarely have complete information and must act on accounts that are coherent and credible enough to guide action. For CDOs, delayed interpretation carries its own risks, so they move forward based on the best available reading rather than waiting for certainty.

Taken together, Weick's (1995) framework and the critical extension offered by Helms Mills et al., (2010) provide a layered account of interpretive experience that is at once personal and social, retrospective and ongoing, and always governed by what is workable within

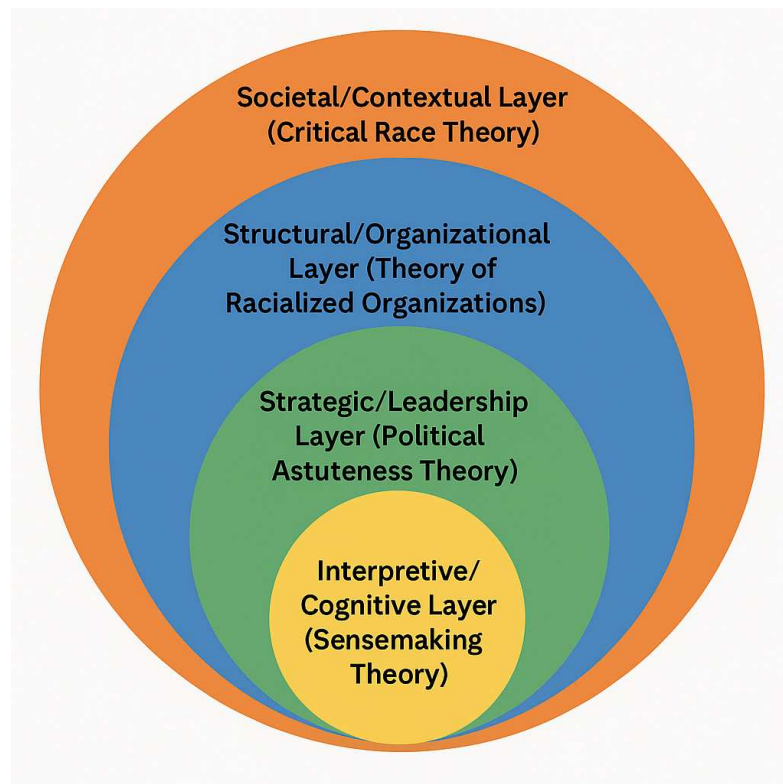
conditions not of the actor's making. This study applies critical sensemaking as a foregrounded lens within the broader sensemaking framework: CDOs were not simply interpreting ambiguous institutional environments but were interpreting racialized institutional environments from racially positioned standpoints, often under conditions in which their interpretations were contested, minimized, or penalized by the institutions they served. When a CDO notices a particular cue, situates it within accumulated experience, interprets it in light of identity and positionality, tests that interpretation in conversation with trusted peers, and acts on an account that feels plausible enough, they are engaging multiple properties of sensemaking at once (Weick, 1995; Marchiondo et al., 2023) while doing so within the power-laden conditions that critical sensemaking insists must be analytically centered (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010).

Conceptual Framework: Multidimensional Integration of Theories

Figure 1 illustrates the nested conceptual framework that results from bringing these four theories together. Critical race theory operates at the societal level by naming racism as structural and endemic, centering questions of justice, and providing the operationalized concepts of endemic racism, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling that anchor the analysis (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Endemic racism situates the conditions CDOs navigate as durable features of educational systems rather than contingent political developments. Interest convergence explains the structural logic through which institutional commitments to equity become conditional and reversible. Counter-storytelling establishes the epistemological warrant for treating CDO narratives as authoritative knowledge about what equity work requires and costs. Racialized organizations theory operates at the organizational level by specifying how

racial hierarchy is enacted through rules, resources, and hegemonic whiteness (Ray, 2019). Political astuteness theory operates at the strategic leadership level by explaining how CDOs navigate these conditions through coalition building, situational reading, and strategic action (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019). Sensemaking, anchored in Weick (1995) and extended through the critical sensemaking framework of Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010), operates at the interpretive level by explaining how CDOs construct meaning from their experiences and generate accounts that are coherent enough to guide their choices. The critical sensemaking extension is particularly important here because it foregrounds what Weick's original framework leaves underspecified: that CDOs are not interpreting neutral organizational ambiguity but are making sense of racialized conditions from racially positioned standpoints, within institutions where their interpretations may be contested, minimized, or treated as illegitimate.

Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework



Seen as a whole, this framework captures both the external conditions that shape CDO work and the internal interpretive and strategic processes CDOs employ to navigate those conditions. The three operationalized CRT concepts move across all levels of the framework rather than residing only at the societal layer. Endemic racism names the structural ground on which racialized organizations are built and within which CDOs must exercise political astuteness and make sense of their experiences. Interest convergence clarifies why the organizational conditions racialized organizations theory describes take the particular form they do in moments of political contestation, when the alignment between institutional interests and equity commitments weakens and institutional retreat becomes predictable. Counter-storytelling connects the CRT and sensemaking layers by establishing that the meaning CDOs make of their experiences is not merely interpretive but constitutes knowledge, knowledge that this study is designed to surface, analyze, and contribute to the scholarly record.

This framework aligns with interpretative phenomenological analysis by foregrounding meaning-making while also specifying the structural, organizational, and political forces that constitute the content and stakes of that meaning-making. The addition of critical sensemaking deepens that alignment by insisting that the meaning CDOs make is never formed in conditions of interpretive equality. Power shapes what can be noticed, what interpretations achieve credibility, and who bears the cost of naming what institutions prefer to leave unnamed. This integrated approach therefore provides a conceptual tool that can account for how CDOs experience hostile conditions rooted in structural racism, how they interpret those conditions from racially and professionally positioned standpoints, and how they respond with politically astute action in pursuit of equity in higher education.

Contribution to the Literature

This study advances scholarship on CDOs and equity leadership in higher education in four interrelated ways.

First, the study deepens understanding of how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment within their institutions. Existing scholarship has established the broad responsibilities, organizational models, and structural challenges associated with the CDO role, including role ambiguity, limited authority, insufficient resources, and uneven access to senior leadership and institutional decision-making (Gravley-Stack et al., 2016; Harvey, 2014; Leon, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014). More recent studies have documented the racialized scrutiny, emotional labor, and professional vulnerability experienced by equity leaders working in contested institutional environments (Koffi, 2024; Ueda et al., 2024). Emerging research has also begun to identify how CDOs and institutions respond to anti-DEI action through strategic inaction, strategic proaction, and strategic reaction (Grim et al., 2025). This study extends that scholarship by using interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine the meaning-making processes that connect CDOs' experiences of political and institutional pressure to their leadership responses. It illuminates how participants interpret changing conditions, assess institutional signals, and determine when to speak, adapt, build alliances, reframe the work, or resist.

Second, this research advances structural analyses of CDO leadership by examining how organizational constraints interact with agency, political judgment, and strategic adaptation. Prior scholarship demonstrates that CDO effectiveness is shaped by reporting relationships, organizational models, resources, institutional culture, and access to decision-making authority (Harvey, 2014; Leon, 2014; Stanley et al., 2019; Worthington et al., 2014). Research also shows

that CDOs can influence institutional outcomes while operating within positions that provide incomplete or inconsistent authority (Bradley et al., 2022; Gravley-Stack et al., 2016). This study examines how CDOs act within these conditions and how their strategic choices emerge through the interaction of racialized organizational structures, institutional relationships, political pressures, and ongoing interpretation.

The integrated theoretical framework strengthens this contribution. Critical race theory provides a foundation for examining the systemic and ideological dimensions of anti-DEI sentiment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The theory of racialized organizations illuminates how organizational rules, resource distributions, and institutional meanings reproduce racial hierarchy (Ray, 2019). Political astuteness theory explains how leaders read people and situations, build alignment, and pursue strategic direction within contested environments (Hartley et al., 2015). Sensemaking theory clarifies how CDOs interpret ambiguous cues and construct actionable understandings as institutional conditions change (Weick, 1995). Bringing these theories together offers a layered account of structure, race, strategy, and meaning-making that has rarely been applied as an integrated framework within CDO scholarship.

Third, the study foregrounds the significance of regional political and institutional context. Contemporary research documents national legal challenges, state restrictions, and broader political campaigns targeting DEI in higher education (Follmer et al., 2024; Harper, 2025). This scholarship demonstrates that institutions face different constraints depending on state policy, governing structures, and public political climates. Greater attention remains needed on how anti-DEI sentiment operates in regions where formal legislative bans may be less

prevalent, yet institutional caution, rhetorical retreat, donor pressure, reputational concerns, and subtle resistance remain consequential.

By focusing on CDOs at New England institutions, this study examines how equity leadership unfolds within a region frequently associated with progressive values, educational access, and commitments to inclusion. Participants' accounts reveal how those public identities can coexist with organizational resistance, racialized institutional practices, limited authority, and heightened caution about equity work. This regional focus demonstrates that anti-DEI sentiment extends beyond states with highly visible legislative restrictions. It also operates through institutional cultures, governance arrangements, interpersonal dynamics, and anticipatory responses to national political developments. The study therefore expands understandings of political geography by showing how regional identity shapes the forms that resistance takes and the strategies available to CDOs.

Finally, this study positions CDOs as interpreters and producers of knowledge about institutional life. Existing qualitative scholarship has centered the subjective experiences of CDOs and documented the tensions, expectations, and organizational conditions surrounding their work (Gravley-Stack et al., 2016). Recent research has further illuminated the emotional labor and racialized pressures experienced by equity leaders (Koffi, 2024; Ueda et al., 2024). This study extends that work by treating participants' narratives as sources of theoretical and organizational insight. Their accounts reveal how institutional power operates, how leaders distinguish symbolic support from substantive commitment, and how equity work moves through formal and informal organizational spaces.

Analyzing participants' narratives through critical race theory and sensemaking also positions their accounts as counter stories that challenge official institutional narratives of

neutrality, progress, and inclusion. These counter stories make visible the emotional, relational, embodied, and strategic dimensions of equity leadership that institutional documents and formal organizational accounts frequently leave unrecorded. Participants emerge as leaders who implement policy and as theorists of organizational contradiction, racialized power, resistance, and change.

Together, these contributions move beyond documenting the presence and structural positioning of CDO roles. They examine how equity leadership is experienced, interpreted, and enacted under sustained political and institutional pressure. Through a theory-informed, interpretive, and regionally grounded design, the study advances scholarship on CDO leadership while offering insight into the structures, relationships, and forms of institutional support required to sustain equity work in contested environments.

Conclusion

This chapter traced the evolution of DEI in higher education, the emergence and institutional positioning of the CDO role, and the increasingly complex terrain in which CDOs conduct their work. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of historical, structural, and organizational scholarship, the chapter showed that CDOs function as institutional actors, interpreters, strategists, and advocates who operate within racialized organizations and shifting political climates. The integrated theoretical framework introduced here critical race theory, racialized organizations theory, political astuteness theory, and sensemaking theory provides a multidimensional lens for examining how CDOs experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment.

Despite growing attention to diversity leadership, important gaps remain in understanding how CDOs make meaning of their roles and exercise agency under intensifying opposition and

institutional constraint. This study addresses these gaps by centering CDOs' lived experiences, treating their narratives as counter stories and as sites of sensemaking and strategic practice rather than as peripheral commentary. The framework outlined in this chapter situates those experiences within broader histories of structural racism, organizational design, and political contestation and clarifies why the interpretive and strategic labor of CDOs merits focused empirical study.

The following chapter presents the methodological approach for this inquiry. It details the research design, interpretative phenomenological analysis, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies used to examine how CDOs construct meaning and lead equity efforts in this contested moment. It also explains why IPA, in combination with the theoretical perspectives outlined above, is particularly well suited to uncovering the depth and nuance of CDOs' experiences in anti DEI climates.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine how Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) in higher education navigated anti-DEI sentiment while continuing to advance equity initiatives at the institutional level. The study employed a qualitative design to investigate CDOs' lived experiences during a period of intensified political backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Given the dual position as both researcher and DEI practitioner, this chapter also addressed reflexivity and positionality and described how these considerations informed data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The sections that follow describe the research paradigm and design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytic strategies, and ethical considerations that together provided a comprehensive account of the study.

To explore how CDOs made meaning of their roles and developed strategies to counter anti-DEI sentiment, the study adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis. IPA was used to examine how individuals constructed meaning from experience and how such meaning was shaped by social, cultural, and organizational contexts (Smith et al., 2009). Within this project, IPA supported close analysis of how CDOs interpreted anti DEI pressures and how these interpretations informed their strategic actions and adaptive leadership responses.

The research was positioned within a social constructivist paradigm, which understands knowledge and reality as co-created through interaction, context, and interpretation (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This paradigm directed attention away from the search for objective generalizations about CDOs and toward the meaning-making processes through which CDOs understood their roles, constraints, and possibilities. It emphasized the value of

examining the subjective and situated nature of equity leadership in the face of institutional and sociopolitical pressures (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

The study's integrated conceptual framework further anchored the methodology by drawing on four interconnected theories critical race theory, racialized organizations theory, political astuteness theory, and sensemaking theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Ray, 2019; Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019; Weick, 1995). Together these perspectives provided concentric levels of analysis that illuminated the societal, structural, strategic, and interpretive dimensions of CDO leadership in anti DEI climates. They informed both the design of the study and the analysis of how participants interpreted and navigated power structures, institutional cultures, and sociopolitical resistance. The research question guiding this study is as follows:

Research Question

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

This research question developed out of a critical sociopolitical moment when DEI work is being rolled back legislatively, and higher education is facing increasing levels of public skepticism and institutional ambivalence toward equity initiatives. Understanding how CDOs experience and respond to these challenges is important for developing policies, training programs for emerging leaders, and supporting institutional transformation.

To answer this research question, the study asked several interpretive sub-questions regarding how CDOs make sense of the resistance they encounter in their institutions, how the identities of CDOs influence their responses to that resistance, and how CDOs adapt their

strategies to meet changing sociopolitical circumstances. The rest of this chapter is organized around providing a rationale for using IPA as the research design, outlining the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the study, explaining the methodological approaches used in the study including participant selection, data collection, and analysis techniques. The chapter also addresses issues of ethics, reflexivity, positionality, and measures taken to establish trustworthiness and methodological rigor.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the lived experiences of CDOs as they confronted an increasingly challenging and politically charged higher education environment. Because the study's purpose and research questions align closely with interpretive inquiry, a qualitative design is well suited to exploring how CDOs make meaning of anti-DEI sentiment and how those experiences shape their responses to that resistance.

Rather than documenting the discrete actions or outcomes of CDOs, the study centered the subjective, relational, and interpretive dimensions of leadership practice, which are shaped in significant ways by context, identity, and power. As a scholar practitioner with many years of experience in DEI leadership, the researcher was drawn to qualitative approaches for their capacity to document nuance, contradiction, and the emotional texture of participants' accounts.

Qualitative research allows attention to voice and context, two elements that are frequently reduced or distorted in quantitative or highly technical designs (Morse, 2020). In this study, the qualitative approach supported an understanding of leadership as a continuous process of meaning creation that unfolds through ongoing interpretation, adaptation, and negotiation rather than through linear decision making or purely technical problem solving. The design also enabled attention to the "how" and "why" questions that are central to leadership practice in

politicized and high-risk environments where CDOs must balance moral commitments to equity with institutional diplomacy and organizational risk (Creswell, 2013). Within this context, leadership is understood less as the exercise of formal authority and more as continuous relational engagement, interpretation, and identity work.

The methodological rationale for this study rested on interpretive assumptions that knowledge and reality are socially constructed and contextually situated (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2014). From an interpretivist perspective, leadership knowledge is not fixed or objective but is co constructed through lived experience and reflection (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2014). This perspective is consistent with literature that conceptualizes leadership as relational, dynamic, and embedded within social systems rather than as a static set of individual traits or behaviors (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Participants in this study were treated as meaning makers whose narratives reflected interpretive acts shaped by professional roles, institutional contexts, and broader sociopolitical conditions. Qualitative interviews were understood as dialogical spaces in which meaning emerges through interaction rather than as neutral instruments for extracting data (Alam, 2020). This view of interviewing supported close examination of how leadership identities were formed, sustained, and contested under conditions of conflict.

Previous studies show that leadership identity and practice are closely tied to self-authorship, social identity, and narrative construction (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Hogg, 2001; Knippenberg et al., 2004). By collecting participants' personal stories, this study aligned with scholarship that highlights the significance of experiential accounts for leadership development, particularly for actors who occupy marginalized or contested roles (Orsini and Sunderman, 2024). Centering CDO narratives was especially important considering evidence that equity

commitments are unevenly implemented and often constrained by organizational status, political pressure, and symbolic compliance (Byrd, 2022; Liera and Desir, 2023). A qualitative design made it possible to examine how CDOs navigated these tensions in practice and to bring into view the interpretive labor involved in sustaining equity work in environments that were resistant to or ambivalent about equity.

Collectively, these considerations indicate that a qualitative research design was theoretically and methodologically appropriate for this study's aims. By defining leadership as context dependent, relational, and meaning based, the design provided a systematic framework for examining how CDOs made sense of, responded to, and continued to lead equity efforts in contested institutional environments.

Qualitative Phenomenological Approach and Social Constructivism Orientation

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach based in a social constructivist orientation. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for examining how CDOs experience and interpret their roles in the face of political backlash and institutional resistance, as it focuses on individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they create within specific contexts (Wing & Park-Taylor, 2022). Instead of focusing on what CDOs did, this study examined how CDOs interpreted the resistance they faced, how they created meaning of that resistance, and how they continued to maintain a purpose in the face of adversity to equity initiatives in environments that are often hostile to, or ambivalent about, equity initiatives. There is substantial support in previous research for the use of phenomenological inquiry to study equity leadership, as it examines the emotional labor, strategic negotiation, and interpretive complexity that define the CDO role (Gravley-Stack et al., 2016; Diale, 2022).

Furthermore, the focus of phenomenological inquiry on the intersectionality and leadership identity of CDOs underscores the necessity to study how CDOs' lived experiences and identities influence the ways in which they create meaning of their experiences and leadership responses (Stokes-Brown, 2022). These ideas resonate with my professional experiences as a DEI leader, in which the disparity between institutional values and daily practices resulted in frequent interpretive and strategic adaptations.

Social constructivism complements the phenomenological orientation of this study by viewing meaning as co-constructed through interaction, discourse, and institutional context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The experiences of CDOs encountering anti-DEI sentiment were viewed not as singular events, but as socially and historically produced phenomena that exist within the institutional cultures and broader political discourses of the institutions within which CDOs operate (Connors & McCoy, 2022; Jiménez Millán & García-Cano Torrico, 2019). This orientation resonates deeply with my professional experience as a DEI leader, in which truth was rarely fixed, and meaning was constantly negotiated through relationships, institutional politics, and commitments to equity.

Collectively, phenomenology and social constructivism provided a coherent foundation for IPA by centering lived experience, reflexive interpretation, and the co-construction of meaning. This foundation aligned closely with the study's focus on how CDOs interpreted resistance and shaped leadership responses within contested institutional environments.

Selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) serves as the methodological anchor for this study, offering a structured yet flexible approach to understanding how individuals make sense of complex, identity-relevant experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As someone who is and has

worked alongside CDOs in real-world institutional settings, I am particularly drawn to IPA's capacity to surface the meaning-making processes underlying visible leadership actions. IPA's emphasis on the double hermeneutic—the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their world—reflects the dynamics I seek to explore in this study: layered, dynamic, and situated forms of understanding. CDOs often find themselves interpreting not only institutional cues but also broader cultural and political discourses, all while constructing coherent leadership identities under pressure. IPA provides the conceptual and analytical tools needed to excavate these interpretive processes.

The methodological alignment between IPA and this study's aims is powerful given the complex positionality of CDOs in higher education. CDOs frequently operate at the intersection of personal convictions, institutional mandates, and increasingly politicized external force conditions that demand nuanced forms of interpretation and reflexivity (Gravley-Stack et al., 2016; Stanley, 2014). IPA facilitates an in-depth exploration of these tensions by enabling a layered analysis of CDOs' lived experiences, capturing how they understand, internalize, and respond to conflicting pressures.

Through a close and iterative reading of interview narratives, this study can identify emergent themes that highlight the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures. Such themes shed light on the adaptive strategies CDOs employ, the values that guide their leadership, and the challenges they encounter while sustaining equity initiatives within hostile or unstable environments. IPA supports synthesizing surface-level descriptions and deeper interpretive insights, revealing the subtleties of leadership in precarious contexts (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Ultimately, using IPA enables a more comprehensive conceptualization of how CDOs navigate and shape institutional change, offering descriptive

richness and interpretative depth. Its commitment to honoring participants' perspectives while engaging critically with broader sociopolitical structures makes IPA appropriate for this research, where professional identity, moral leadership, and political acumen converge.

IPA is distinguished by its commitment to understanding how participants interpret their lived experiences, explicitly emphasizing the dual processes of description and interpretation. Unlike more traditional qualitative methodologies, IPA acknowledges that individuals actively make sense of their experiences rather than passively experiencing them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This methodology is particularly advantageous in the context of CDOs, as it accommodates the exploration of individual experiences within broader institutional frameworks, allowing for a deeper analysis of how external sociopolitical pressures affect lived realities. The idiographic commitment of IPA also supports a rigorous, case-by-case examination of each participant's narrative. In honoring their distinct contexts and histories, this method permits a closer analysis of how leadership is enacted, not as a generalizable model, but as a situated practice shaped by values, resistance, and adaptation.

Tenets of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Grounded in the core tenets of lived experience, interpretation, and deep attention to individual narratives, IPA offers a rigorous and human-centered methodology for exploring how individuals make meaning of complex, high-stakes experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This study draws on these tenets to investigate how CDOs interpret and respond to anti-DEI sentiment in higher education—an increasingly volatile terrain shaped by institutional resistance, political scrutiny, and racialized structures of power. My decision to adopt IPA is grounded in methodological alignment and shaped by my lived experience as a DEI leader and equity

scholar. I approach this work with deep respect for the emotional and strategic labor CDOs undertake and a commitment to elevating their voices as they lead in contested environments.

IPA centers on how individuals make sense of their lived experience, particularly in contexts marked by ambiguity, conflict, or transformation. In this study, IPA explores how CDOs process and respond to institutional pushback and political hostility while holding fast to their equity commitments. As someone who has led and supported institutional equity work under similar conditions, I resonate with IPA's commitment to honoring participants' inner worlds and the interpretive processes through which they construct meaning. These philosophical foundations provide a pathway to understand what CDOs do and how they experience and navigate resistance, often under immense pressure and surveillance.

Phenomenology: Lived Experience as Foundation

As Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty advanced, phenomenology provides the foundation for IPA by centering the primacy of lived experience. Husserl's notion of epoché, or bracketing, encourages me to set aside assumptions and approach each participant's account openly and with care (Husserl, 1970). Although I bring professional knowledge and proximity to this field, I recognize the importance of listening without presumption, allowing meaning to emerge from the participant's perspective.

Heidegger's (1962) concept of being-in-the-world expands this lens by embedding human experience within historical, political, and structural realities. This resonates strongly with the CDO experience—these leaders do not operate in isolation but are continually shaped by institutional cultures, sociopolitical climates, and legacies of exclusion. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment (1962) is equally vital; the emotional toll, public visibility, and

physical demands placed on CDOs are integral to how they enact and sustain their leadership. Phenomenology makes space for this full-bodied, context-rich understanding.

Hermeneutics: Interpretation as Ethical Engagement

IPA is also grounded in hermeneutics, the theory and practice of interpretation. Gadamer's idea of the "fusion of horizons" reminds us that meaning is co-constructed through dialogue between researcher and participant (Gadamer, 1975). This double hermeneutic—where I interpret how CDOs interpret their roles—requires humility, reflexivity, and an ethical commitment to representation.

My insider status in DEI work allows for deeper rapport but demands vigilance against over-identification. Hermeneutics offers tools to navigate this tension by emphasizing the active, reflective process through which meaning is constructed. Especially in contexts where anti-DEI rhetoric suppresses or distorts equity narratives, careful interpretation becomes an act of resistance that makes visible the silences, compromises, and creative adaptations of those doing this work.

Idiography: Honoring Particularity

The IPA's idiographic commitment to understanding each case in its full specificity before drawing broader themes aligns with the reality that there is no single archetype of CDO leadership. Each participant operates within a distinct ecology of institutional history, leadership culture, resource availability, and political exposure. This is especially true in the current climate, where anti-DEI legislation, alumni pressure, and media scrutiny vary widely by state and institution.

Idiography demands that I examine each narrative in-depth, honoring its contextual texture and internal logic. This slow, deliberate analysis enriches the findings and affirms each

participant's experience as a valid and valuable lens into the broader phenomenon. It also complements this study's conceptual framework, which conceptualizes meaning-making as unfolding across nested layers of cognitive, strategic, organizational, and societal.

Conceptual Framework and Integration

The conceptual framework used to frame this study provided both a methodological guide and an interpretive lens, since it informed the development of the interview protocol, focused analytic attention during coding, and structured the interpretation of how participants navigated power, resistance, and meaning-making across different contexts. The framework incorporated four related theories into a concentric model, offering a multidimensional way to understand how CDOs experienced, interpreted, and responded to anti-DEI sentiment while working to advance institutional equity initiatives. Theory was treated as a necessary interpretive tool rather than an abstract exercise, since it equipped the researcher to develop intentional questions, engage critically with participants, and bring depth and sensitivity to participants' narratives. As a scholar-practitioner with firsthand experience navigating institutional resistance, the researcher approached this framework with methodological training and a strong commitment to praxis.

This framework was grounded in the belief that meaning-making in hostile environments must be examined across multiple levels, including societal, structural, strategic, and interpretive. At the outermost level, critical race theory provided the foundational lens by situating CDOs' experiences within a broader historical context of racialized exclusion, retrenchment, and resistance, and by carrying five interrelated tenets into the analysis, including the endemic and structural nature of racism, interest convergence, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, and the critique of liberalism and colorblindness (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989;

Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT treats racism as an endemic structural feature of U.S. society, embedded in policies, laws, and institutional practices that shape educational systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and within this study, CRT made it possible to locate participants' accounts within a larger racial project in which diversity, equity, and inclusion work was being strategically undermined. The interview protocol invited CDOs to reflect on how racialized discourses such as neutrality, colorblindness, or "viewpoint diversity" affected their role and legitimacy, and CRT guided the reading of these accounts against a backdrop of anti-Blackness, systemic silencing, and policy rollback, with the critique of liberalism in particular helping to name how appeals to neutrality functioned not as the absence of a racial position but as the active enforcement of one.

Nested within CRT, Ray's theory of racialized organizations shifted the analytic focus to the institutional structures that influenced or limited CDO work (Ray, 2019). Ray conceptualizes organizations as racialized formations that operate through formal rules and informal norms that maintain racial hierarchies, and this lens was especially generative for understanding how CDOs were structurally marginalized, tasked with transformative work while frequently lacking control over budgets, institutional authority, or consistent executive support. Interview questions asked participants to describe their organizational roles, how equity-related decisions were made, and what barriers they encountered when advocating for systemic change, and during analysis, racialized organizations theory helped surface gaps between institutional rhetoric and practice and highlighted how diversity efforts were symbolically embraced yet structurally constrained (Handsman and Siegler, 2025; Woulfin and Yurkofsky, 2025).

Moving further inward, political astuteness theory provided a leadership-centered perspective that acknowledged the strategic, relational, and tactical demands of CDO work. Hartley and colleagues conceptualize leadership as a politically embedded process in which leaders read institutional dynamics, build coalitions, and act with discernment amid competing agendas (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019), and this perspective aligned closely with the researcher's own experience as an equity leader, where effective interventions often depended less on positional authority and more on strategic positioning. The framework guided interview prompts that asked CDOs to recount moments when they made calculated decisions about when to push, pivot, align, or resist, and informed the interpretation of how participants negotiated politically charged environments while balancing institutional loyalty with accountability to equity and justice (Lewis et al., 2023).

At the center of the model, sensemaking theory provided the interpretive core (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking attends to how individuals interpret cues, assign meaning, and construct coherent narratives in volatile and ambiguous circumstances, and this theory was particularly relevant given the rapid emergence of new policies, public controversies, and institutional contradictions affecting DEI. Sensemaking aligned with the methodological commitments of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which likewise emphasizes subjective meaning-making, and in practice, sensemaking guided exploration of participants' inner narratives, emotional responses, reframing of resistance, and moments of clarity or conflict in their work (Merriweather et al., 2024; Weick, 1995). The analysis paid particular attention to how CDOs described the mental and emotional labor of decoding institutional messages, responding to backlash, and making decisions that reflected both personal values and institutional constraints.

These four theories were connected by conceptual coherence and methodological usefulness, since each offered a distinct yet complementary entry point into the data and collectively supported interview questions and analytic moves that remained rooted in context, power, and lived experience. A single participant's account could, for example, reveal how ostensibly race-neutral policies undermined DEI work (CRT), how CDOs were structurally marginalized (racialized organizations), how the leader adjusted strategy (political astuteness), and how they interpreted and navigated ambiguity (sensemaking), and this kind of multi-level interpretation depended on the integrative structure of the framework.

The model also expressed the researcher's epistemological stance as a social constructivist scholar-practitioner, with meaning understood as constructed between participants and researcher, situated in context, and shaped by power. The theoretical tools described above supported an analysis that was sensitive to the complexities of leading equity work under siege and that was critically informed by the researcher's experience and positionality, and the conceptual framework functioned as both interpretive lens and methodological guide, since it influenced the design of the interview protocol, shaped coding and interpretation, and helped ensure that the findings remained accountable to CDOs' lived experiences and to the structural conditions they navigated. The overall goal was to produce a nuanced, justice-oriented understanding of how equity leadership was conducted, constrained, and reimaged in the face of intensifying resistance.

A Note on Differential Theoretical Weighting

Although the conceptual framework for this study integrated four theories, their analytical weight varied across the themes, and this variation reflected both what participants foregrounded in their narratives and the interpretative phenomenological logic that guided the

analysis. In interpretative phenomenological analysis, theoretical lenses are applied interpretively rather than deductively, so the prominence of each theory in a given theme was determined by close attention to what participants described, felt, and did in that portion of their account (Smith et al., 2009).

Critical race theory functioned as a constant evaluative lens by situating all participant accounts within a broader racialized history of higher education, even when racism was not named explicitly, and the five tenets carried different analytic weight at different moments, with endemic racism and the critique of liberalism most active when participants described policy rollback and colorblind reframings, interest convergence most active when participants described institutional retreat under political or financial pressure, intersectionality most active when participants described how race, gender, and professional position combined to shape their exposure to risk, and counter-storytelling most active when the analysis treated participants' accounts as authoritative knowledge about institutional conditions (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Racialized organizations theory carried greatest weight when the analysis focused on institutional architecture, resource flows, and organizational positioning (Ray, 2019). Political astuteness theory was most central when participants discussed strategic choices, coalition building, and calibrated responses to institutional and political pressures (Hartley et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2019). Sensemaking theory threaded through all themes as the primary lens for examining how participants interpreted their circumstances and constructed meaning over time (Weick, 1995).

This differential weighting underscores that the theoretical framework followed the data rather than being imposed uniformly across it and clarifies why all four theories were

methodologically necessary for capturing the structural, organizational, strategic, and interpretive dimensions of CDO leadership in anti-DEI contexts.

Reflexivity and Positionality: Role of Researcher

Using the dual role of researcher (as both an insider and interpreter) was critical to methodological rigor in IPA. Given my work as a CDO and equity practitioner, I was located at the intersection of multiple social and professional identities, which created both a rich connection to the research context and the need for ongoing, intentional reflexivity (Hampton et al., 2021; Goundar, 2025). This insider perspective provided me with a privileged entry point to community-specific knowledge and nuances of multiracial lived experiences; however, it also necessitated a systematic consideration of subjectivity and potential bias (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Goundar, 2025).

Robust reflexive practices were critical in this regard. Specifically, reflexive memoing was not episodic, but rather iterative, occurring before, during, and after interviews, and throughout the various analytic phases. The stages of this reflexive memoing process are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Reflexive Memoing Process in an IPA Study

Reflexive Stage	Purpose	Illustration from this Study
Pre-Interview Positionality	To surface assumptions, identity connections, and expectations prior to data collection	Acknowledging shared professional identity as a sitting CDO; anticipating resonance around precarity, donor pressure, and institutional resistance
Immediate Emotional Reaction	To document active responses during or immediately following interviews without conflating them with participant meaning	Noting feelings of protectiveness, admiration, fatigue, indignation, or over-identification following participants' narratives
Analytical Sensemaking	To interpret how participants construct meaning while separating researcher resonance from analytic claims	Identifying themes such as symbolic inclusion, institutional precarity, donor influence, and boundary-setting in anti-DEI climates
Methodological Self-Audit	To assess how researcher behavior may have shaped data collection or interpretation	Noticing tendencies to over-assume, rush prompts, defer to articulate participants, or avoid probing due to rapport

Cross-Case Pattern Recognition	To track recurring meaning-making structures across participants while maintaining idiographic integrity	Observing shared interpretations of role ambiguity, structural volatility, safety concerns, and adaptive recalibration
Theoretical Integration	To situate emergent themes within the conceptual framework guiding the study	Linking findings to sensemaking theory, political astuteness theory, theory of racialized organizations, and critical race theory
Reflexive Bracketing & Re-centering	To intentionally pause, bracket assumptions, and return analytic focus to participants lived experiences	Re-grounding analysis when fatigue, familiarity, or pattern recognition risked flattening later interviews

I documented the internal dialogue, shifting assumptions, and emotional responses through detailed reflective journaling, reflexive notes, and self-criticism, thereby providing visibility into how my positionality affected the interpretative process (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Moriceau, 2018). Table 1 illustrates the reflexive memoing process employed in this study, demonstrating how reflexivity functioned as a systematic analytic practice rather than a tangential reflection. This iterative reflexivity monitored the development of analytic insights and provided self-reflection into the hermeneutic circle of IPA, thereby providing greater transparency and accountability. Such practices were widely recognized in the literature as methods to reduce bias and increase analytic rigor (Hampton, 2021).

Reflexivity was not perceived solely as a mechanism to mitigate bias, but as an epistemological resource that increased and enriched the interpretative process. In this approach, my continuous negotiation between my personal history and analytical impartiality corresponded to what Thomas (2024) called "academic hospitality," a methodological openness to emergent insights arising from the interplay of identity, context, and inquiry. This openness allowed for the incorporation of new perspectives, especially when engaged with complex, intersectional narratives, thereby producing a more authentic and critically nuanced analysis (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020; Moralli, 2023).

By highlighting the dynamic relationship between my positionality and participants lived experiences, I leveraged my insider status as an analytical resource rather than an obstacle. Such

a stance was supported by Olukiun et al. (2021), who argued that a clear and transparent articulation of researcher positionality, where the intersections of personal, cultural, and professional dimensions were explicitly acknowledged, enhanced the credibility and contextual grounding of qualitative inquiry. This perspective provided additional methodological transparency and enhanced my ability to question and reframe the underlying epistemological frameworks informing the research process (Koot et al., 2020).

Rather than viewing positionality as an obstacle to objectivity, I used it intentionally as a methodological tool. By deliberately documenting the influences of my identities, values, and social connections, I constructed a narrative that was both self-aware and contextually situated, thereby supporting the execution of a rigorous interpretative practice within the context of IPA (Moralli, 2023). Reflexive memoing assisted this balance by enabling deliberate bracketing and re-centering when familiarity or emotional proximity threatened to obscure participants' meaning-making. This dynamic, iterative negotiation between personal subjectivity and analytical rigor facilitated the systematic documentation of internal processes that were critical to critically engaging with the inherent complexities of insider research (Olukiun et al., 2021; Thomas, 2024).

The integration of positionality and reflexivity within IPA was a continuous dialectical process that converted potential biases into avenues of critical insight. Methodological transparency provided that the analytic process remained grounded in context and self-aware, while underscoring the value of embracing all of oneself, academically, culturally, and personally, as a component of the scholarly endeavor. Ultimately, such an approach produced scholarship that was analytically robust and heavily rooted in the lived experiences of the communities being studied (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020; Koot et al., 2020). My interpretive

work was both personal and political and I approached this work with my entire self - as a scholar, leader, multiracial individual, and institutional insider. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, the IPA process allows me to view this complexity as a source of insight.

Participant Selection and Setting

Participant selection for this study was intentionally grounded in the methodological commitments of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Because IPA seeks depth, nuance, and idiographic understanding, I used criterion-based purposive sampling to identify participants who had direct and substantial experience leading diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, access, or related institutional change efforts in higher education. This sampling strategy supported the study's focus on how senior equity leaders made meaning of anti-DEI sentiment within complex organizational and sociopolitical contexts.

To be eligible for participation, individuals had to meet three criteria. First, they had to serve, or have recently served, in a senior-level DEI or institutionally significant equity leadership role in higher education, such as Chief Diversity Officer, Vice President for Equity, Academic Diversity Officer, Assistant or Associate Vice President, Assistant Provost, Executive Director, Director, or a comparable role with broad institutional responsibility for equity-related strategy, culture, or organizational change. Second, participants had to be employed at a nonprofit college or university in New England at the time of the study or have accumulated this leadership experience across one or more New England institutions. Third, participants had to have at least three years of cumulative experience in senior-level DEI or equity leadership work, whether in a single role or across multiple roles and institutions. This criterion was designed to ensure that participants had sufficient depth of professional experience to reflect meaningfully on patterns of resistance, adaptation, and leadership across time.

The sample was intentionally homogeneous in relation to the phenomenon under study, in that all participants held roles centered on institutional equity leadership within higher education in New England. The sample also included meaningful variation in institutional type, formal title, racial and ethnic identity, gender, class background, and professional pathway. This balance is consistent with IPA, which values a shared experiential terrain while still allowing for important nuance and variation across cases. New England offered an especially relevant regional context because participants worked across institutions shaped by distinct histories, political climates, and organizational cultures, all of which informed how anti-DEI sentiment was experienced and interpreted.

In line with IPA's emphasis on depth and analytic manageability, the study included 10 participants. This sample size allowed for sustained idiographic engagement with each participant's account while also supporting careful cross-case analysis. A snowball sampling strategy supplemented the initial purposive sample and helped identify additional participants whose experiences fit the study criteria. This was especially useful given the seniority of the roles involved and the relational trust often needed for participation in research on politically sensitive leadership work.

Established professional networks, including regional higher education and DEI leadership networks, supported recruitment. All recruitment and data collection occurred over approximately four months, allowing time for initial outreach, scheduling, two interviews per participant, follow-up communication, and iterative analytic engagement. Table 2 summarizes key demographic, institutional, and professional characteristics across the sample.

Table 2: Overview of Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Institution Type	Years in Current Role	Socioeconomic Background	First-Gen UG	Key Leadership Frameworks/Orientations
P1	Woman	Asian American	Small, private	6+	Working-class	Yes	Critical race theory; relational; mission-aligned; data-informed
P2	Woman	Black–West Indian, multiracial	Medium university	14 (CDO since 2020)	Working-class	Yes	Organizational effectiveness; relational; liberation-focused; faith; Black feminism; social justice
P3	Woman	Biracial (Black/White)	Medium university	14 (CDO since 2020)	Working-class	No	Organizational effectiveness; human-centered; market-informed; capitalist lens
P4	Man	Black, queer	Private research university	<3.5	Lower-middle-class	Yes	Adaptive; relational; trust-based; tempered messaging
P5	Woman	Multiracial, Caribbean	Medium university	14 (CDO since 2020)	Working-class	No	Counter-stratification; human-centered; ancestral obligation; social justice roots
P6	Woman	Arab / SWANA	Community college	3	Working-class	No	Emergent strategy; futurist planning; collaborative; low-hanging fruit approach
P7	Woman	Latine (Colombian)	Community college	2+	Middle-class	No	Equity-mindedness; HR- and compliance-informed; transparency and caution
P8	Man	Asian American	Women’s college	5+	Unknown	Yes	Tempered radicalism; collaborative; access-oriented; data-driven (NADOHE framework)
P9	Man	African American	Private university	~9	Unknown	No	Anti-corporate critique; resistance navigation; political viewpoint diversity; coalition building
P10	Woman	White, bisexual	Private university	~3	Middle-class	No	Loving; principled; humble; listening; restorative practices; pluralism; critical thinking

The participant selection strategy was designed to generate rich, experience-near accounts of equity leadership in a contested moment. By using criterion-based purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling, the study centered participants whose professional responsibilities placed them in direct relationship to the phenomenon under investigation. The sample included leaders whose titles and institutional locations varied, but whose work shared a common core: senior-level responsibility for advancing equity-related change within higher education institutions in New England. This approach supported methodological coherence with IPA by privileging depth, contextual specificity, and analytic attention to a relatively bounded group of participants who could speak from sustained

experience. Rather than seeking breadth or representativeness, the sampling design prioritized experiential richness, conceptual relevance, and sufficient variation to illuminate both convergence and nuance across cases.

The final sample size was determined by the aims of IPA and by the depth and quality of the accounts generated, rather than by a goal of thematic saturation. IPA prioritizes intensive, idiographic engagement with a manageable number of participants so that each case can be examined closely before patterns are explored across cases. The ten participants in this study provided sufficiently rich and detailed narratives to support both within-case analysis and cross-case interpretive work. This sample size allowed for sustained attention to individual meaning-making while also making it possible to identify recurring patterns, important divergences, and contextual variations across participants' experiences.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to conducting participant recruitment and collecting data for this study, I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Colorado State University (CSU) (IRB Protocol #6988). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary method of collecting data for this IPA study. This method allows participants to express themselves thoroughly while providing the researcher with the flexibility to pursue emergent themes and the participant's meaning-making processes. Smith and Osborn (2008) refer to semi-structured interviews as the exemplary form of data collection for IPA, since they afford the participant sufficient freedom and depth to express the complexity of their experiences within the context of those experiences. Therefore, this method of data collection was suitable for determining how CDOs perceived and negotiated resistance to DEI initiatives in higher education.

Structure and Protocol for Interviews

Each participant completed two semi-structured interviews. The two-interview format was designed to support depth, rapport, and layered reflection, all of which are valuable in IPA. The first interview focused on establishing relational trust and gathering foundational narratives about the participant's professional pathway, institutional context, role responsibilities, and early experiences of encountering resistance to equity work. The second interview invited deeper reflection on meaning-making, strategic adaptation, leadership choices, and the evolving interpretation of anti-DEI sentiment within the participant's institutional setting.

This two-interview structure allowed participants to revisit and deepen earlier accounts rather than compressing complex reflection into a single sitting. It also created space for participants to move from description toward interpretation across time. In several cases, issues raised in the first interview took on greater clarity, emotional texture, or strategic significance in the second interview, which enriched the phenomenological and interpretive depth of the data. For this reason, the two interviews were understood as complementary parts of the same participant case rather than as separate datasets addressing different questions. The use of a two-interview protocol is consistent with recommendations from Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), who advocate for the use of "guided conversations" in IPA that prioritize participant agency, narrative depth, and rich, contextualized storytelling over structured, question-and-answer approaches.

An interview guide (see Appendix D) was used to support each interview and consisted of open-ended prompts designed to elicit detailed experiential descriptions. The interview guide questions were closely tied to the research questions and the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks — critical race theory, the theory of racialized organizations, political astuteness theory, and sensemaking theory. A typical opening question was: "Can you describe a time when

you encountered resistance to a DEI initiative, and how you understood and navigated that situation?" Follow-up probes such as "How did your institutional context shape your response?" or "What internal or external factors influenced your interpretation and decision-making?" allowed participants to reflect on the interrelationship of structural forces, personal meaning-making, and strategic leadership. For example, if participants described resistance in abstract terms, follow-up prompts invited reflection on how those moments were emotionally and strategically interpreted, thus fostering greater phenomenological engagement.

Interviews were conducted via virtual, secure video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) to allow for flexibility, accessibility, and participant convenience, especially considering the demands of senior leadership positions. Although participants were offered the option to complete in-person interviews, all opted for virtual interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing participants sufficient time to engage deeply without being fatigued (Seidman, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Participants were advised that they could pause or take a break at any time during the interview, thus promoting ethical care and prolonged engagement during emotionally charged discussions. Interviews were recorded audio and video, with participant consent, and were then auto-transcribed using platform-generated transcripts. The transcriptions were reviewed and cross-referenced with the audio- and video-recordings to ensure accuracy and to attend to vocal tone, pace, and other emotional nuances relevant to IPA.

Capture and Processing of Data

Audio- and video-recordings of all interviews were obtained with participants' informed consent and were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic details necessary to IPA. Verbatim transcription was specifically important in IPA, as pauses, repetition, emphasis, and hesitation can carry analytical significance beyond propositional content (Smith et al., 2009). The

generated transcript files were reviewed against the original audio- and video-recordings to ensure accuracy and to consider paralinguistic features that contribute to the participant's meaning-making.

In addition to interview transcripts, reflexive analytic memos were completed during and immediately after each interview. These memos documented the researcher's initial interpretive impressions, emotional reactions, and observational notes about contextual or non-verbal dynamic elements that contributed to the participant's narrative and facilitated reflexive engagement and analytic transparency throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002; Larkin et al., 2006). The creation of these reflexive memos was an essential part of IPA's double hermeneutic, which describes the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation of their lived experiences (Larkin et al., 2006).

Participant follow-up was used selectively and modestly, and in cases where participants requested to review material or where clarification was needed to ensure accurate representation of a quotation, event, or contextual detail, follow-up communication occurred by email. These exchanges were used for clarification rather than for asking participants to validate the full interpretation. When clarification was provided, it was incorporated into the analytic record and considered alongside the broader interview data and reflexive notes. This approach supported ethical representation while remaining consistent with the interpretive aims of IPA, in which analytic authority rests with the researcher rather than with participant validation (Birt et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2009).

All data collected for this study were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices that were only accessible to the researcher. According to CSU's research guidelines, the data will be maintained securely for a period of five years post-study completion and then permanently

destroyed through secure digital destruction. The data management and storage procedures were used to protect participant confidentiality and to meet ethical standards for data stewardship. A summary of the sequence of data collection procedures is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Data Collection Procedures

Step	Description
1. IRB Approval	Study received Colorado State University Institutional Review Board approval (Protocol #6988) prior to participant recruitment.
2. Participant Recruitment	Participants were identified and recruited based on predetermined selection criteria to ensure diversity of institutional contexts and professional experiences.
3. Interview Guide Development	A semi-structured interview guide was developed and refined, informed by the study's research questions and conceptual framework.
4. First Interview	Initial 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually to establish rapport and elicit foundational narratives about professional trajectories, institutional contexts, and encounters with anti-DEI sentiment.
5. Second Interview	Follow-up 60–90-minute interviews delved deeper into meaning-making processes, strategic adaptations, and leadership practices under sociopolitical pressure.
6. Recording and Transcription	Interviews were audio- and video-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim using platform-generated transcripts, which were reviewed against original recordings for accuracy.
7. Reflexive Memoing	Analytic memos were documented during and immediately following each interview to capture interpretive impressions, emotional responses, and contextual observations.
8. Member Checking	Selective follow-up communication occurred by email when clarification was needed regarding quotations, contextual details, or participant meaning.
9. Data Storage and Security	All data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices and will be retained securely for five years before permanent deletion.

This study treated each interview as analytically meaningful while ultimately understanding both interviews as part of a single participant case. I first read and noted each interview separately to preserve the temporal development, emphasis, and texture of each conversation. I then brought both interviews together within each participant case to examine how meaning-making unfolded across the two conversations. This approach allowed me to retain the idiographic discipline of close engagement with each interview while also developing a fuller

account of each participant's lived experience, interpretive process, and leadership response in relation to the research question.

Overall, the procedures for collecting and processing data for this study supported the commitment of IPA to idiographic richness, phenomenological sensitivity, and interpretive rigor, and provide a clear and systematic foundation for the subsequent analytical processes discussed in the next section.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the iterative, interpretive, and idiographic commitments of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Analysis began during data collection and continued recursively as interviews, transcripts, recordings, and reflexive memos were revisited. The purpose of the analysis was to understand how participants experienced, interpreted, and responded to anti-DEI sentiment in higher education, with sustained attention to meaning-making, context, and lived complexity (Smith et al., 2009).

All transcripts were manually coded to support close, detailed engagement with participants' language and narratives. I began by reading and listening to each interview multiple times while reviewing the transcript for accuracy and reentering the tone, pacing, emphasis, and emotional texture of the conversation. During this stage, I made preliminary notes about striking phrases, recurring tensions, contextual cues, and moments that appeared especially significant in relation to each participant's sensemaking.

Because each participant completed two interviews, analysis proceeded in two phases within each case. First, I engaged each interview separately so that the distinct character, timing, and emphasis of each conversation could be preserved. This helped me attend to what was foregrounded in the first interview as compared with what deepened, shifted, or became newly

intelligible in the second. Second, I brought both interviews together as a single participant case. Treating the two interviews as one case made it possible to examine the fuller arc of each participant's meaning-making, including how they described their context, revisited prior experiences, elaborated strategic choices, and interpreted leadership under pressure across the two conversations.

Initial noting followed three classic areas of IPA attention, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual noting (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive notes focused on the substantive content of participants' accounts, including key experiences, relationships, dilemmas, and institutional dynamics, such as Participant 10's account of her president's decision to rename the office from "DEI" to "Community and Belonging" through a "word vomit" brainstorming process. Linguistic notes attended to how participants used language, including repetition, metaphor, intensifiers, pauses, humor, and shifts in tone. Examples included Participant 9's use of the "dissolving scene" from *Avengers: Infinity War* to describe the collapse of institutional values and Participant 6's metaphor of conservative pushback as a "wild animal being trapped into a corner." Conceptual notes moved toward interpretation by considering what participants' accounts suggested about identity, power, ambiguity, agency, vulnerability, and meaning-making. One example was the analysis of Participant 1's "paradox of the pioneer," in which she remained bound to her institution by the safety of its culture while having experienced trauma in building it. This stage reflected the double hermeneutic central to IPA, in which I interpreted how participants had themselves interpreted their experiences. Reflexive memos were written throughout to track analytic movement, emotional response, and moments when insider resonance required bracketing, slowing down, or recentering (Finlay, 2002).

From this close case by case work, I developed concise interpretive phrases that captured significant patterns of meaning within each participant's account for example, "The Accidental DEI Leader" for Participant 7 and "The Isolated Belonging Broker" for Participant 6. These case level patterns were grounded in each participant's own language and context while moving toward more interpretive articulations of experience. Once case level analysis had been completed for all participants, I examined patterns across cases to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and variation. A clear area of convergence appeared in participants' experiences of strategic recalibration for example, both Participant 10 and Participant 5 proactively modified their office names from "DEI" to "Community and Belonging" to sustain their work. A significant divergence appeared in participants' perceived level of institutional safety: Participant 3 described her university as a "good boat" providing protection during turbulent times, while Participant 9 experienced what he termed the "Great Dissolution" of institutional integrity and described a sense of internalized "treason." Variations were shaped by each participant's unique identity and sociopolitical environment for example, Participant 6's leadership strategy was fundamentally influenced by her vulnerability as a non-citizen, requiring a shift to "covert leadership," while Participant 8 drew on 27 years as an institutional insider to embed equity into the institution's decennial review processes. Analytic techniques such as abstraction and subsumption were used to examine relationships between themes, such as how Participant 2's "dread" and Participant 4's "mental gymnastics" both exemplified the psychological labor required to navigate institutional precarity (Eatough and Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

Throughout the analytic process, themes and subthemes were developed as relational interpretive groupings rather than fixed hierarchies. Although IPA scholarship often employs the hierarchical language of superordinate and subordinate themes, this study used the language of

themes and subthemes to emphasize relationality rather than rank, a choice grounded in both theoretical and epistemological commitments. Drawing on critical race theory, the analysis resisted language that implies fixed hierarchy or conceptual subordination among experiences that are themselves produced within racialized systems of power (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Themes functioned as analytic constellations interconnected sites of meaning that emerged through participants' retrospective sensemaking within racialized organizations (Ray, 2019). Subthemes did not represent lesser or dependent ideas; rather, they captured distinct but interrelated dimensions of experience that illuminated how racialized leadership was lived, interpreted, and negotiated across contexts. This horizontal analytic structure remained consistent with IPA's idiographic and cross case commitments while reflecting the study's CRT informed attention to complexity, contradiction, and the uneven conditions under which meaning was produced.

In Chapter Four, each theme is presented first through participants' own meaning-making, followed by interpretive commentary in which I examine how those meanings are shaped by institutional contexts, power relations, and broader sociopolitical conditions. Participant voices are preserved through extensive quotation to honor their testimony as counter narratives to dominant institutional accounts of equity work and to provide phenomenological grounding for interpretive claims (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). The thematic findings were developed through transcript level interpretation of each participant's account followed by cross participant synthesis that preserved individual nuance while identifying shared patterns.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytic process through memos that documented moments where my experiences as a DEI leader either resonated with or diverged from participants' accounts. This proximity sharpened what I noticed in participants' narratives

the coded language, institutional pivots, and relational calculus structuring their decisions while also introducing the risk that recognition could slide into projection. Reflexive writing was used to bracket these responses and to make visible the conditions under which particular interpretive decisions were made. Reflexivity here functioned as a form of interpretive accountability rather than a claim to neutrality, enabling readers to evaluate the analysis with awareness of its positioned character (Finlay, 2002).

Only after themes and subthemes had been developed through close engagement with the data did I return explicitly to the conceptual framework. I then examined participants' accounts through sensemaking theory, political astuteness theory, critical race theory, and racialized organizations theory (Weick, 1995; Hartley et al., 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ray, 2019). These perspectives clarified that participants' narratives were not simply stories of individual stress, resilience, or leadership style but accounts of leaders seeking to remain legible, strategic, and morally grounded inside institutions shaped by racialized distributions of power, legitimacy, and vulnerability. The theoretical framework thus enriched interpretation while remaining subordinate to the phenomenological and idiographic priorities of IPA.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical standards required by CSU's Institutional Review Board, prioritizing participant safety, confidentiality, and emotional well-being throughout the research process. Given the heightened sociopolitical scrutiny surrounding DEI efforts in higher education, participants faced potential professional risk if their perspectives were identifiable. Ethical vigilance was therefore not merely procedural but foundational to the design and execution of the study. Consistent with critical race theory's commitment to research accountable

to communities historically marginalized and harmed by extractive research practices, ethics were approached as a relational and political responsibility that extended beyond IRB compliance to encompass the protection of participants' voices, institutional positions, and professional futures (Dillard, 2000; Tillman, 2002). In this study, ethics functioned as an ongoing, reflexive practice inseparable from methodological rigor and interpretive responsibility (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

The IRB application addressed potential risks related to participant identifiability and institutional sensitivity, recognizing that CDOs occupy high-profile roles within politically charged environments. The possibility that candid reflections on institutional resistance or anti DEI climates could result in reputational or employment consequences necessitated a careful and anticipatory ethical approach.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection using a comprehensive consent form (see Appendix B). The document outlined the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights, including the voluntary nature of participation and the ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. The consent process emphasized participant autonomy, including the right to decline any question or to request that specific portions of their account be excluded from the final analysis if concerns about identifiability arose. This approach aligned with qualitative research practices that prioritize participant agency and psychological safety (Orb et al., 2001).

To further support informed decision making, each interview began with a verbal review of the anonymization process. Concrete examples were used to illustrate how identifying details would be generalized or altered, and participants were invited to raise concerns about specific features they wished to have further obscured or removed. For instance, references to highly

visible institutional initiatives were reframed using broader descriptors to reduce the risk of identification. Participants' preferences for how institutional details were represented were incorporated into the analytic record and honored in the final write up.

Confidentiality was safeguarded through multiple strategies. All participant names were replaced with researcher-assigned Kiswahili pseudonyms in transcripts, analytic memos, and written reports. This choice was both principled and personal, rooted in the researcher's cultural identity and positionality and intended to protect confidentiality while keeping participants human on the page. A fuller rationale for these pseudonyms, including English glosses, is provided in Chapter Four. Institutions were referred to by region and type rather than by name, and quotations were edited to remove or mask contextual identifiers while preserving analytic meaning. Raw data were stored on an encrypted, password-protected external drive, physically separated from identifying information, in alignment with guidance on balancing rich description with anonymity (Kaiser, 2009; Richards and Schwartz, 2002).

As an insider researcher, a DEI practitioner and scholar studying other DEI practitioners, I was attentive to the specific ethical obligations that shared professional identity created. Insider status could lower participants' guard in ways that generated richer data but also increased the risk of disclosing more than they might otherwise choose to share with an outside researcher. This relational proximity created an ethical responsibility to avoid exploiting the trust that professional familiarity afforded, to protect participants from potential harm associated with candid disclosure, and to represent their accounts with fidelity rather than using insider knowledge to read beyond what participants explicitly offered (Tillman, 2002). These concerns were navigated through ongoing reflexive memoing, transparent consent practices, and deliberate attention to participants' comfort and boundaries throughout both interviews.

Given the emotionally demanding nature of recounting experiences of resistance, marginalization, and constraint, interviews were conducted with deliberate emotional care. Questions were sequenced to begin with less sensitive topics and gradually progressed to more emotionally or politically charged content. Participants were offered breaks as needed and reminded of their ability to pause or stop the interview at any time. A follow-up communication was sent within 48 hours of each interview to check on participants' well-being, consistent with trauma-informed qualitative research practices (Ellsberg and Heise, 2002). This well-being check-in was distinct from separate follow-up communication used for clarification of quotations, factual details, or contextual information.

Recognizing that CDOs often occupy roles requiring both public visibility and institutional discretion, particular care was taken to honor the conditions under which participants shared their experiences. Ethical responsibility extended beyond procedural compliance to maintaining relational integrity, protecting participant trust, and ensuring that analytic representations reflected both participant insight and contextual vulnerability (Tracy, 2010). Consistent with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) distinction between procedural ethics and ethics in practice, the ethical demands of this study were not resolved at the IRB stage but were encountered continuously in decisions about what to include or protect, how to represent candid accounts, and how to honor the weight of what participants shared.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To support rigor and trustworthiness, this study drew on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, enacted in ways consistent with the interpretive commitments of IPA. These criteria were used in dialogue with IPA-specific evaluative standards — sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency

and coherence, and impact and importance — which guided how trustworthiness was understood and practiced throughout the study (Smith, 2011). Trustworthiness was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, idiographic depth, reflexive memoing, documentation of analytic decisions, and the use of thick, contextualized description.

Credibility was strengthened through repeated engagement with interview transcripts, audio-, and video-recordings; close case-by-case analysis; and careful comparison across cases. This prolonged analytic attention allowed patterns of meaning to emerge gradually and helped guard against premature or oversimplified interpretation. The two-interview structure further supported credibility by building relational trust with participants, creating space for accounts to deepen over time, and allowing attention to how participants revisited, reframed, or elaborated earlier meaning-making in the second interview. Credibility was also supported through peer debriefing with two experienced qualitative researchers, who reviewed analytic memos, emergent themes, and interpretive reasoning at key stages, offering critical perspective and prompting examination of interpretive assumptions. Selective follow-up communication with participants was used when clarification was needed regarding quotations, factual details, or contextual meaning. Consistent with IPA's interpretive commitments, these exchanges served to support accurate representation of participants' accounts rather than to transfer interpretive authority to participants (Birt et al., 2016).

Transferability was supported through thick, contextualized description of participants, institutions, and sociopolitical conditions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The study sought depth rather than statistical generalizability. By situating participants' experiences within specific organizational, relational, and political contexts, the analysis enables readers to assess

the applicability of the findings to other higher education settings and to comparable leadership contexts where equity work is structurally contested.

Dependability was supported through an audit trail that documented key stages of the research process, including recruitment decisions, interview procedures, transcript review, analytic notes, reflexive memos, development of themes and subthemes, and revisions to interpretive framing. This documentation made the analytic path visible and supported transparency regarding how findings were developed, consistent with Smith's (2011) criterion of transparency and coherence.

Confirmability was supported through sustained reflexive practice. Because I entered the study as a scholar practitioner with professional proximity to the phenomenon, I used reflexive journaling and memoing throughout data collection and analysis to examine how resonance, prior experience, values, and assumptions might shape interpretation. Peer debriefing with two colleagues provided an additional check on confirmability by surfacing potential blind spots that insider proximity might otherwise have obscured. These practices did not aim to remove subjectivity from the study but to support disciplined self-awareness and to ensure that interpretive claims remained grounded in participants' accounts. A fuller discussion of positionality and its implications for interpretation is provided in the Role of the Researcher section.

In combination, these strategies supported a rigorous and ethically attentive IPA study grounded in lived experience, interpretive depth, and methodological transparency, one that honored both the phenomenological specificity of individual accounts and the broader interpretive aims of the research.

Limitations

This study was designed to generate in-depth, contextually grounded insight into how senior equity leaders in higher education experienced, interpreted, and responded to anti-DEI sentiment. Consistent with IPA, the study prioritized idiographic depth, contextual specificity, and interpretive understanding. As a result, the findings are best understood as analytically and contextually meaningful rather than broadly generalizable across all institutional settings (Reid et al., 2005).

Participants' accounts were shaped by the institutional, regional, and sociopolitical environments in which they worked. The sample was geographically bounded to New England higher education institutions, which supported contextual coherence and participant access but limited the degree to which findings speak to CDO experiences in regions where the political and legislative landscape differs significantly. The anti-DEI environment in New England, while real and consequential, was distinct from the more aggressive legislative contexts of states such as Florida, Texas, or Georgia, where executive orders and state legislation have more directly constrained or dismantled DEI infrastructure. Although important patterns emerged across cases, each account remained embedded in a distinct organizational history, leadership structure, and political climate. The findings therefore illuminate how this phenomenon was experienced and interpreted within a bounded group of senior equity leaders in New England higher education.

The study was also conducted during a specific and unusually volatile political moment, a period of intensified federal and state-level opposition to DEI in higher education. Participants' accounts were necessarily shaped by the conditions of that moment. This temporal specificity enriched the study's contextual depth but also meant that findings reflected a snapshot of CDO meaning-making under conditions that may evolve over time. Similarly, because the sample was

composed entirely of senior-level CDOs, the perspectives of mid-level DEI practitioners, faculty diversity officers, or staff-level equity workers who may experience institutional resistance differently were not represented.

Another limitation concerns the study's reliance on self-reported interview data. Participants offered thoughtful, detailed, and often deeply candid accounts; however, interview-based research necessarily depends on memory, retrospective interpretation, and participants' willingness to name events, emotions, and organizational dynamics within the research encounter. In an IPA study, this reliance on narrated experience is methodologically appropriate because the approach is centrally concerned with how participants make meaning of their lived experiences. Even so, the findings should be understood as interpretive accounts rather than objective reconstructions of institutional events. The study did not triangulate participant narratives with institutional documents, internal communications, or organizational records. Instead, the analysis remained grounded in participants' narrated realities and the meanings they assigned to their experiences.

The professional and political risks associated with the topic also shaped the study. Participants occupied highly visible leadership roles in a climate marked by anti-DEI hostility, institutional scrutiny, and contested public discourse. It is therefore reasonable to assume that some participants may have moderated, strategically framed, or softened parts of their accounts. At the same time, many participants spoke with striking candor about fear, exhaustion, betrayal, role strain, and institutional contradiction. This candor strengthened the study, but it does not eliminate the possibility that some dimensions of participants' experiences remained unnamed or only partially disclosed.

My positionality as a scholar-practitioner and senior equity leader strengthened the study by deepening access, rapport, and interpretive sensitivity to the phenomenon under investigation. That proximity, however, required sustained reflexive attention throughout data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2008). Reflexive memoing, documentation of analytic decisions, repeated return to the data, and careful attention to the distinction between participant meaning and researcher interpretation supported methodological discipline and interpretive accountability.

The two-interview design also shaped the study in important ways. It strengthened depth by allowing participants to revisit earlier reflections, clarify meanings, and extend their accounts over time. At the same time, the analysis required careful attention to both the distinctiveness of each interview and the coherence of each participant's case. This complexity was addressed through separate initial readings of each interview followed by integrated case-level analysis.

Collectively, these methodological conditions defined the scope of the study and framed the contribution of its findings. The strength of the study lay in its close engagement with lived experience, its sustained idiographic and cross-case analysis, and its careful interpretation of how equity leaders made meaning within contested institutional environments. Trustworthiness was supported through reflexive documentation, sustained engagement with participants' narratives, and thick, contextualized description. The final account remains an interpretation, and naming that openly strengthens the methodological integrity of the dissertation by making the interpretive process transparent rather than hidden.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology that guided the study and demonstrated the alignment among the study's purpose, philosophical orientation, conceptual framework, and analytic approach. Grounded in a qualitative IPA design, the study centered participants' lived

experiences and meaning-making as they navigated anti-DEI sentiment within complex institutional and sociopolitical contexts.

A social constructivist paradigm informed the study's epistemological orientation, positioning knowledge as relational, contextual, and co constructed through experience and interpretation. This orientation shaped the interview design, the two interview structure, the role of reflexivity, and the idiographic commitment that guided the analytic process. IPA provided the methodological approach for examining how participants interpreted resistance, ambiguity, institutional contradiction, and leadership responsibility in their roles.

The chapter also described the participant selection strategy, recruitment procedures, interview process, data management practices, and analytic procedures used to support methodological rigor and transparency. The analytic process was explained as iterative and inductive, beginning with close idiographic engagement with each participant's account before moving to cross case pattern development and returning to the conceptual framework only after themes and subthemes had been developed through sustained engagement with the data.

The chapter addressed the decision to organize findings using the language of themes and subthemes rather than the hierarchical IPA terminology of superordinate and subordinate themes. This terminological choice was grounded in critical race theory to resist analytic structures that mirror the harmful organizational hierarchies under critique.

Attention was given to positionality and reflexivity as central features of the research process. Reflexive memoing and documentation of analytic decisions were integrated throughout data collection and analysis to support interpretive accountability and deepen engagement with participant meaning. Ethical considerations, confidentiality protections (including the use of researcher-assigned Kiswahili pseudonyms, the full rationale for which is provided in Chapter

Four) and strategies for establishing trustworthiness were likewise addressed as integral to the study's design and execution. Trustworthiness strategies were enacted in dialogue with both Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria and Smith's (2011) IPA specific standards and were supported through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, audit trail documentation, and sustained reflexive practice.

Together, these methodological decisions provided a coherent and theoretically grounded foundation for examining equity leadership as a situated, interpretive, and relational practice. Chapter Four presents the findings that emerged through idiographic and cross case analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study examining how Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while continuing to pursue equity-oriented change. Findings draw on two rounds of in-depth interviews with ten CDOs across public and private institutions in New England. Honoring the double hermeneutic also means resisting the pull toward pure advocacy. Participants are expert readers of their own institutions, yet their accounts are situated, retrospective, and shaped by the need to remain coherent to themselves under sustained strain. Throughout this chapter I read both with and against the grain of those accounts, taking participants' meaning-making seriously while also attending to the tensions within it, the costs their strategies carried, and the perspectives, of students, junior colleagues, and staff, that a study centered on CDOs cannot directly access. My own position as a current CDO sharpened my recognition of participants' language and also inclined me toward sympathetic readings; naming that inclination is part of the interpretive discipline this analysis requires. This chapter addresses the study's central research question:

Research Question

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

Chapter Four presents the findings from two rounds of in-depth interviews with ten senior diversity officers serving at colleges and universities across New England. Participants

held titles ranging from Vice President and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer to Assistant Provost and Director, and they represented a broad range of institutional contexts, including small private specialized colleges, women's colleges, mid-sized universities, and community colleges. The dual-interview design was methodologically deliberate because it allowed me to examine participants' sensemaking across two points in time, capturing how their interpretations, commitments, and strategies shifted as the anti-DEI political climate intensified and institutional pressures persisted between interview rounds (Smith et al., 2009, 2022).

Throughout this chapter, anti-DEI sentiment refers to the broader climate of organized political, legislative, donor, and institutional resistance that challenges, restricts, or delegitimizes diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education. Participants described this environment as a climate of heightened scrutiny and constraint that reshaped what could be said publicly, what could be funded, and what leaders were expected to absorb quietly as institutions managed reputational risk. Chapter Two provides a detailed review of the policy landscape; in this chapter, that landscape serves as the context within which participants made meaning of their lived experience. This chapter brings into view what participants described having to carry and navigate as they worked to sustain equity commitments, including shifting expectations about what could be named, uneven access to authority and resources, and the professional and personal risks that often settled most heavily on the CDO role. Participants described these pressures through immediate organizational realities such as changing messaging directives, stalled initiatives, tightened approval processes, and the gradual normalization of silence. This chapter centers how participants made sense of that reality, how they responded to it, and what the work required of them as they continued to lead through it.

This chapter is written in alignment with the methodological commitments of IPA, reflecting the movement from an idiographic focus on individual lived experience toward cross-case thematic interpretation. Early analysis involved close, case-by-case engagement with each participant's account, with careful attention to the specificity of each person's meaning-making before patterns across cases were developed. As the analysis deepened, themes and subthemes were generated inductively through sustained attention to both convergence and divergence, allowing the chapter to present shared meanings while remaining grounded in the texture and particularity of individual experience. To situate the findings within the lived, institutional, and meaning-making contexts from which they emerged, the chapter begins with an overview of the participants and the settings they represented.

Participant Overview

Ten CDOs serving across New England participated in two rounds of in-depth interviews for this study. Their titles and reporting structures varied, including Vice President for Equity and Inclusion, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Assistant Provost for Community and Belonging, Associate Vice President and CDO, and Director of Mission, Values, and Community Impact. Their institutional contexts also varied, spanning small private specialized colleges, women's colleges, medium-sized private universities, and community colleges. This range was deliberate because it allowed the analysis to hold both the shared patterns and the contextual differences in how CDOs navigated an intensifying political climate across very different kinds of institutions.

Participant confidentiality was a central ethical concern throughout this study. Leading DEI work in the current political moment carries real professional risk, and participants understood that risk clearly. Several expressed concern that even conventional pseudonyms could

inadvertently signal identity markers such as race, gender, nationality, or religion, leaving them vulnerable to institutional scrutiny or retaliation. Participants initially requested numerical designations, which offered strong protection. At the same time, I wanted the study to preserve their presence and humanity. Reducing participants to numbers risked flattening the narratives this study was designed to honor. From a CRT lens, anonymity can protect participants while still affirming their dignity, voice, and relational presence. Naming practices carry meaning because they can either reproduce erasure or resist it through more humanizing forms of representation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

To reconcile participant safety with these commitments, I assigned each participant a single Kiswahili word as a symbolic pseudonym throughout the findings. This choice is both personal and principled. I am Tanzanian, and Kiswahili is part of my cultural identity and positionality as a researcher. Using Kiswahili pseudonyms allowed me to bring my full self into the research while protecting participants' confidentiality. Because Kiswahili is not spoken by any participant and is not connected to their institutions or communities, the pseudonyms do not increase the risk of recognizability.

I also hold the ethical weight of this decision with care. Kiswahili is a living African language, and I use these words strictly as research identifiers rather than as cultural representation. I provide English glosses for transparency and invite readers to understand the pseudonyms as confidentiality labels rather than claims of cultural affiliation or ownership.

Each pseudonym was derived inductively from idiographic analysis and selected to capture a dominant orientation in how each participant described their work, their strategies for navigating institutional resistance, and the affective labor of leading equity in hostile or ambiguous environments. These names are identifiers rather than analytic claims about

participants' identities. They preserve confidentiality while keeping participants human on the page. The pseudonyms are Hewa, meaning air, Roho, meaning spirit, Maji, meaning water, Mwerevu, meaning clever or strategically astute, Ardhi, meaning earth or ground, Ulinzi, meaning protection, Busara, meaning wisdom, Subira, meaning patience, Moto, meaning fire, and Huruma, meaning compassion or mercy.

Table 4 provides an abbreviated overview of each participant's pseudonym, institutional type, title level, and reporting structure. The detailed profiles that follow offer a more nuanced account of each leader's professional trajectory, positionality, institutional environment, and approach to navigating anti-DEI sentiment. They also show how participants made meaning of their experiences from within the specific conditions of their roles and institutions. That specificity matters because the cross-case thematic analysis grows from the particular ways participants interpreted what was happening, what it required of them, and how they understood themselves in relation to the work.

Table 4: Participant Summaries

Participant	Swahili Pseudonym	Title / Role	Reporting Line	Interpretive Leadership Orientation Summary
Participant 1	Hewa	CDO	President	A strategic, policy-oriented leader who closely monitors external political climates and anticipates institutional risk. Operates with analytical precision and proactive planning to safeguard and advance equity initiatives.
Participant 2	Roho	VP, Equity & Inclusion / CDO	President	Leads from deeply rooted moral and spiritual grounding. Anchors decision-making in faith, Black feminist thought, and an unwavering belief in human dignity despite sustained hostility.
Participant 3	Maji	VP & Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer	President	Navigates institutional terrain with flexibility and translation skill. Adjusts communication and strategy fluidly across stakeholders to sustain equity work amid changing conditions.
Participant 4	Mwerevu	Associate Director, Workplace Belonging	HR / CHRO	Demonstrates political acuity and tactical intelligence. Reads institutional dynamics carefully and leverages influence strategically to advance equity within constrained environments.
Participant 5	Ardhi	VP & Chief Diversity Officer	President	Focuses on building sustainable, replicable equity structures. Invests in people, relationships, and systems that create long-term institutional grounding for DEI work.
Participant 6	Ulinzi	Director of Mission, Values & Community Impact / Inaugural CDO	VP (restructured from President)	Approaches leadership with a protective orientation—shielding staff, students, and programs from political backlash while ensuring continuity of equity commitments.
Participant 7	Busara	Executive Director, Strategic Priorities & Professional Development	VP	Exercises disciplined judgment and strategic restraint. Balances transparency with caution, particularly in politically sensitive decision-making contexts.

Participant	Swahili Pseudonym	Title / Role	Reporting Line	Interpretive Leadership Orientation Summary
Participant 8	Subira	VP for Equity and Inclusion	President	Emphasizes incremental, data-driven change. Accepts the slow pace of institutional transformation and remains steady in pursuit of long-term accountability structures.
Participant 9	Moto	Associate VP & Chief Diversity Officer	Provost	Leads with visible urgency and justice-driven intensity. Willingly confronts systems of oppression and mobilizes coalitions to push transformative change.
Participant 10	Huruma	Assistant Provost, Community and Belonging	Provost	Centers relational care, empathy, and belonging. Prioritizes healing and community well-being as foundational to sustainable equity leadership.

Participant Profiles

These profiles introduce the ten participants as whole people in particular institutional locations. In IPA terms, they situate the meaning-making that becomes visible in each participant’s account, including how they understood their roles, read their environments, and carried the emotional and political weight of equity leadership. I wrote them to help the reader feel each participant’s stance and orientation before the thematic analysis begins.

Hewa

Hewa entered this period of anti DEI hostility from a position of hard-won institutional knowledge, and she met it with the analytical precision that has defined her decade-plus in the CDO role. The terrain she navigated was one of preemptive institutional retreat, leaders contracting around threats they imagined rather than faced, ceding ground on work that remained lawful because accusation had acquired the force of verdict. She was told to operate as though equity frameworks she had not abandoned were no longer available to her, and she adapted without conceding the frameworks themselves. What that cost her was a specific and accumulated kind of exhaustion, not the exhaustion of overwork but the exhaustion of double awareness, of carrying a rigorous intellectual lens into every room while managing the

institutional surface that signaled compliance to those watching for what she was no longer supposed to name.

Her strategies were anticipatory rather than reactive. She tracked the external legal climate with the discipline of someone who had learned that institutional retreat arrives before any formal mandate requires it, and she used that tracking to audit institutional messaging and position the work ahead of exposure rather than behind it. Where others were forced into translation, Hewa had already built the translation into her practice, credibility constructed through outcomes, through collaboration, through an equity logic tied to student success that no legal pressure had yet found a way to prohibit. Her response to being told she lacked executive presence was not assimilation but refusal— she named the racialized and gendered script beneath the critique and kept leading on her own terms.

Her gaze forward is structural and long. She is actively working to endow her office so that it survives beyond her tenure, building financial permanence for equity work that cannot be dismantled by a personnel change or a budget cycle. She is also reskilling, deepening her expertise in policy and legal documents to keep pace with the executive orders and external threats reshaping the terrain. Her recommitment is not naive. She has watched colleagues of color leave or be pushed out until she became the most senior person of color standing, and she refuses to read that as progress. She stays because she can practice, and many cannot.

Roho

Roho leads from inside a context she experiences as corporate and risk averse, and the hostility she navigated was less overt opposition than the slow institutionalization of caution, a climate in which neutrality was declared as policy, explicit equity language became politically managed, and the CDO role was affirmed in principle while being kept structurally small. She

arrived at a role still forming, with a unit too tiny to match what the institution was asking of it, and she spent her first year mapping the gap between what was declared and what was resourced. The double talk she encountered was not always deliberate. Some of it was fear made organizational habit, and she learned to read the gap between the explicit and the implicit as its own institutional communication.

The emotional tone of her experience was one of cognitive overload and dread, a mind that would not stop rehearsing questions of legitimacy and voice, and a body that brought work anxiety back from vacation before any specific threat had confirmed it. She named the cost of confidentiality requirements that forced her to hold information from staff who trusted her, using language, traitorous, that named the violation not as a policy problem but as a rupture in who she wanted to be as a leader. The depletion she described was real and physical, and she was working through it actively, tracking her own thoughts in therapy, trying to locate where genuine strategic adaptation ended and something more morally troubling began.

Her approach to resistance was one of preservation, sustaining as resistance, she called it, paired with a faith anchored moral grounding that kept the work from becoming purely instrumental. She translated equity into the language her institution could receive: community, belonging, thriving, code words carrying the analysis her context would no longer permit her to name plainly. Her listening tours, her relationship with the counseling center, her slow coalition building across affinity groups all reflected a leader learning the terrain and building carefully within it, knowing the structural work required patience she was still accumulating.

She is looking ahead with a pragmatism that holds genuine hope alongside real uncertainty. She names survival itself, staying in the role, keeping her team intact through another academic year, as a meaningful definition of success, which is one of the most honest

future orientations in this study. She is also quietly building skills in organizational development, beginning to imagine what the work might look like outside institutional captivity, in consulting or other forms that she would control. The moral conviction underneath all of it remains intact: a world without castes, dignity as the irreducible floor, liberation as the horizon toward which she keeps orienting herself.

Maji

Maji has been reading institutional currents for over a decade, and her experience of anti DEI hostility was shaped by that accumulated literacy. She moved through the hostile terrain with the ease of someone who had already translated the work many times before, who knew that the question was never whether to adapt but how to adapt without losing the analysis underneath the adaptation. The specific hostility she faced was structural and interpersonal: a provost who actively blocked her access to the president, a leadership demotion when one president gave way to another, and the ongoing labor of working in a business focused institution that valued management literature over the equity frameworks she drew on most naturally. She navigated all of it without losing her orientation toward the systemic, reading institutions as systems that required translation, timing, and relationship to move.

The emotional texture of her experience was one of hard-won equanimity rather than ease. She named burnout plainly, acknowledged the toll, and then set an annual intention to preserve her peace, not as a luxury but as a structural necessity for someone who understood that her capacity to do the work depended on protecting what the work kept trying to consume. She also named the specific injury of being treated as though she only had standing in narrowly defined diversity things, and her refusal of that reduction was not quiet. She confronted it

directly, making clear across many years that she did not contribute only on those terms and that anyone who thought otherwise had misread her career.

Her strategies were organizational in their deepest logic. She did not do any work on her own, every initiative had a co-owner, because anything owned solely by the CDO office was removable the moment the CDO was. She designed her DEI board committee with cross committee representation built into its bylaws, creating equity anchors whose accountability traveled with their role rather than their personal commitment. She worked with the head of facilities, the director of open educational resources, the Career Success Equity Program through HR, building a web of distributed ownership so thorough that she was confident the work would continue even if her office were legislated out of existence.

Her horizon is one of controlled agency. She moved proactively to rename and reposition her division not because external pressure required it but because she chose to retain narrative control rather than wait to be told. She is not invested in who owns the work, she is invested in the outcome. That orientation, disciplined and genuinely non ego driven, is what has allowed her to build something that may outlast her in ways most CDO offices cannot claim. There is a tension worth holding here between Maji's account of egoless, distributed stewardship and her equally clear insistence on narrative control and personal standing; the two coexist in her practice, and the analysis need not flatten one into the other.

Mwerevu

Mwerevu entered his role during a period of active institutional recalibration, and the hostility he navigated took the specific form of structural containment, supervisors without content expertise who called him the DEI person, a reporting structure that placed him across the street and outside the building where decisions were made, and a pattern of refusals so consistent

that he had never once received a yes on a professional recommendation. The institution wanted to claim the function while maintaining distance from genuine partnership in it, and Mwerevu read that arrangement clearly, without illusion, from early in his tenure. Losing access to the president's ear was the formal confirmation of what the physical and relational distance had already communicated.

The emotional cost of his experience was a distinctive and accumulating aloneness, not the loneliness of social isolation but the aloneness of not being sought out, not being trusted, not being treated as someone whose expertise was genuinely wanted rather than merely managed. He described that aloneness with spatial precision: across the street, in a different building, an island. What it did to his relationship to his own professional judgment over time was not collapse but a kind of guarded self-possession, he kept bringing forward recommendations while holding a quiet, deliberate openness about whether anyone on the receiving end would genuinely hear them. That holding without surrender was itself a form of resilience.

His strategies reflected the sharp social intelligence and hustling orientation he named as part of his formation. He built trust through candor and curiosity, asking why, offering alternative perspectives without diluting the point, finding what he needed even when the institution refused to provide it formally. He leveraged informal networks alongside official channels, worked through workarounds when direct pathways were closed, and kept moving inside a system that repeatedly signaled containment. When the emotional weight became unsustainable, he took leave and reframed it not as withdrawal but as boundary setting and clarity, a deliberate return of energy to what genuinely mattered to him.

His forward orientation is one of redirected purpose. He left certain institutional expectations behind and came back with a clearer sense of what he owed the work and what the

work owed him. His visioning is less about institutional transformation than about finding the forms of impact that remain available within constrained structures, and about the honesty required to tell new CDOs what the ground looks like once their feet are on it rather than what the recruitment process promises.

Ardhi

Ardhi navigated anti DEI hostility from inside an institution that expected her to absorb its risk calculus and translate it into program decisions, dampening visibility, sunseting initiatives, choosing phrasing that could survive scrutiny without abandoning the analysis behind it. The hostility she faced was cumulative and institutional rather than a single confrontation, the slow revision of what equity could be called, the dilution of teach ins and programs built over years, the quiet contraction of what had once been expanding work into something that had to be made smaller so it would not attract the wrong attention. She did the adaptations and she named, with unusual moral clarity, what they cost, refusing the strategic rationalization that would have allowed her to settle into compliance as though it were simply prudent leadership.

What distinguished her experience from others in this study was the visibility of her internal court of conscience, the part of her that kept cross examining her own strategic decisions against a deeper ethical standard, asking whether adaptation and capitulation had become indistinguishable from the outside looking in. She carried that question without resolving it. Her fatigue was not only physical, but it was also the fatigue of someone who understood that she had been set back years, not decades, and who chose to hold that distinction with precision while privately uncertain whether measuring the harm carefully made her complicit in its normalization.

Her strategies were relational at their foundation. She saw herself as a community organizer rather than an administrator, taking the one on ones, building the meetings, connecting things that did not previously seem connected, treating the people she worked with as neighbors rather than stakeholders. She invested in external scaffolding: peer networks, multiple coaches calibrated to different kinds of thought partnership, the kind of parallel support structure that takes years to build and that she built because the institution's formal structures were never designed with her role's particular pressures in mind. She also built for redundancy, creating tools, processes, and learning opportunities specifically designed to distribute commitment into the institution so the work could not be extracted when she was gone.

She stays because she can practice, and she names that moral logic explicitly: many cannot. Her grandmothers were domestic workers who never had access to higher education, and she carries them into the building they were never allowed to enter. That inheritance does not waver when the institution makes the work difficult. It predates all of that, and it survives all of that, and it is the source from which her continued obligation flows.

Ulinzi

Ulinzi's experience of anti DEI hostility was shaped by two overlapping forms of precarity that few other participants in this study named with the same directness: the structural precarity of leading as an inaugural CDO in an institution without established equity infrastructure, and the personal precarity of leading as an Arab immigrant non-citizen whose immigration status made certain forms of public visibility genuinely dangerous. The hostile terrain she navigated was therefore both organizational and existential, an institution that restructured her reporting line downward when pressure intensified, support she had carefully

negotiated that evaporated when the administration changed, and a calculation about what she could safely lead publicly that no job description had prepared her to make.

The embodied cost of her experience was among the most physically explicit in this study. She described panic responses during periods of heightened institutional conflict, and she read those responses not as weakness but as accurate somatic information about what she was carrying. The care she brought to her own sustenance, therapy, energy work, massage, the regular gathering she called girl dinners, was not ornamental. It was the deliberate, repeated effort to feed a depleted soul in doses, because the drain was continuous and no single act of care could dissolve it. Her pain persisted even in the presence of that care, and she named that honestly: the conditions producing the harm remained, and self-care met a wall the practices could not fully dissolve.

Her strategies were shaped by a mentor's wisdom that she had fully internalized: go for the low hanging fruit, and do not get yourself killed. That counsel was not metaphorical in her context. She reframed DEI as institutional mission rather than ideological position, changing her title and her office's language to anchor the work in values the institution could not repudiate without disavowing itself. She built coalitions through that language, finding advocates who showed up, joined the committees, asked what she needed, and she learned to leverage her institution's support to step back from the initiatives that made her most personally vulnerable, declining to perform the appearance of systemic impact when the structural conditions did not support it.

Her forward orientation is one of pragmatic honesty and redistributed accountability. If leadership does not want to listen, that is not her failure, and she has arrived at that position not as resignation but as an active refusal of the institutional logic that positions the CDO as

responsible for the institution's willingness to be changed. She works sustainably within limits she can see clearly, and that clarity, earned, not given, is its own form of integrity.

Busara

Busara navigated the hostile terrain with the specific intelligence of someone who came to equity leadership through finance, compliance, and investigations, fields that had taught her how institutions document, defend, and justify themselves, and how to build accountability structures that could withstand scrutiny. The hostility she encountered arrived through multiple channels: colleagues who asked to have DEI removed from their titles because it had become a professional liability, a complaint alleging she had improperly influenced a hire on racial grounds, and the 360 degree feedback that named her a paid individual who should not be at the college. She understood all of it as data about the institutional climate rather than personal verdict, and she calibrated her response accordingly, transparent where transparency served, careful where carefulness protected both herself and the institution, and deliberate about which battles deserved her energy and which ones she would let pass without reaction.

The emotional cost of her experience was present and acknowledged without dramatization. She named specific moments when comments landed in ways that required internal effort to process and decide about, the comment about her accent, the evaluation feedback that hit her in a way she had not expected, the years it took to arrive at the place where she could carry her bilingual immigrant identity into every professional space without apology. That arrival, at the unapologetic, was not given. It was built over time, through a process she described with unusual self-awareness: learning to read what might seem like deficits through an asset lens, learning to wear her identity with the specificity and directness that had become her professional signature.

Her strategies were built on what she called being gently bold, a phrase that names something more precise than compromise. She rebranded programs and titles not because the work had changed but because she understood that the work could continue indefinitely if it did not announce itself as a target. She developed the equity-mindedness framework as a structural prompt embedded in policy conversations, a mechanism that made equity questions organizationally difficult to avoid, not a one-time argument but a recurring institutional insistence. She moved equity-committed staff from soft grant funding to institutional funding lines, protecting them financially so they could not be made expendable through the next grant cycle. She embedded equity into the institution's strategic plan, the Faculty and Staff Assembly's governance structure, and the hiring toolkit. She moved, always, from special initiative toward steady state. Busara is wisdom with spine, holding principle and pragmatism in the same hand without letting either dissolve the other.

Her forward orientation is structured around permanence. She does not care what the work is called. She cares that it continues. Her gaze is on the people who do it alongside her, on ensuring that those people have job security that does not depend on a political season, and on building the kind of institutional architecture that can hold equity even in the absence of the person who built it.

Subira

Subira entered the CDO role unexpectedly, a faculty member of twenty-seven years who had found his way into equity leadership through teaching, through the scholarly recovery of Asian American literary voices, and through a question that had always animated both projects: how do we listen to those who have not been heard? The hostility he navigated was both institutional and personal. He managed an OCR complaint from an external anti DEI

organization, navigated the institutional politics of a hostile provost whose opposition had to be routed around rather than through, and faced a stalker who had confronted him at choir rehearsal and sent hundreds of threatening communications directly linked to his equity work. He held all of it with a deliberate equanimity, not detachment, but the composed steadiness of someone who had built a daily practice capable of absorbing what the role kept generating.

The emotional tone of his experience was one of managed complexity. He acknowledged the cost plainly, harder weeks, a little stressful, trying to stay calm, without catastrophizing it. What pressed on him more subtly was the moral complexity of operating with more institutional information than most and having to hold that complexity without being able to share it in ways that would have made certain institutional decisions legible to the junior faculty of color who experienced them as betrayal. He had come to peace with the fact that they did not necessarily see him as an ally, and that peace was hard-won and genuinely held, not performed.

His strategies were patient and architecturally minded. He outlasted a hostile provost rather than confronting him directly, understanding that tenure and seniority were themselves forms of institutional power that could be activated slowly. He developed a governance dashboard tied to the NADOHE framework that placed equity accountability on the Board of Trustees' agenda three times a year, making DEI progress a permanent artifact of how the institution oversaw itself rather than a report that could be shelved. He baked equity into decennial and midterm academic department reviews. He eliminated loans from financial aid packages. He removed the explicit naming from the Racial Justice Action Planning initiative while embedding its work more deeply into institutional processes, moving, always, from visible target to steady state.

He is stepping down from the VP role to return to the faculty, taking a sabbatical first. That transition is not departure. His mantra, you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it, is the organizing logic of his forward orientation: relocating purpose rather than releasing it, continuing the work from a faculty position where his tenure protects the forms of honesty his administrative role made costly. He plants trees whose shade he will not enjoy, and he does so with the clarity of someone who has chosen the long game not because it is comfortable but because it is the only game with a real horizon.

Moto

Moto came to this work through a pivotal moment of personal decision, the choice to stop hiding inside comfort and to confront oppression directly, and that orientation defined everything about how he led, what he built, and what it cost him when the institution he had invested in revealed itself fully. The hostile terrain he navigated was among the most explicit in this study: a president whose silence at critical moments he named as cowardice before power, a leadership team that went publicly supportive while privately dismantling, and a set of conditions he described with a precision that left no room for institutional alibi, “internal treason”, “sharecropping”, a dizzying oscillation between we are behind you and hold on, we cannot do that. He had built something real, and he watched the institution retreat from its stated commitments in ways that left both the building and the builder diminished.

The embodied cost of his experience was the most cumulative and irreversible in this study. His body broke down. His health was impacted across an arc that did not start in any single year but built across a decade. His website avatar remained a photo from 2015, the month he started, because the weight gain and the bags under his eyes and the visible evidence of what the work had done to him were things he was still making peace with. The relationships strained

by this work extended into his personal life in ways that no professional boundary had contained. He named what the institution had taken from him without euphemism, and he refused the messianic framing that would have made that extraction noble rather than structural.

His strategies were built on relational intensity and the willingness to let things burn when explanation, collaboration, and coalition building had all been exhausted. He mobilized faculty allies with long institutional memory, activated confidential resources as coalition partners when conventional support channels had been compromised, and built off-campus connections to steady his read of a rapidly shifting institutional environment. He also began investing in what came next, a personal productivity coach, a clinical licensure path, a private practice, moving deliberately toward a form of impact the institution could not dismantle.

His forward orientation is a radical redirection of purpose. He has released institutional faith without releasing the work itself. What he built may not come back, and he has arrived at that reckoning without flinching. What endures are the lives he touched, the students who say they would not have made it to graduation without him, whose development and well-being remain beyond executive decree. He refuses to be DEI-Jesus. His labor was professional commitment that the institution failed to sustain. He is building something outside its reach, and he is still here.

Huruma

Huruma came to equity leadership from student affairs, a background that gave her a relational fluency and a genuine orientation toward care that she has carried into every institutional context since. The hostile terrain she navigated was quieter than what some other participants described, but its contours were no less real: a role without much power to make systemic changes, a supervisor who met with her for thirty minutes a month at best, an HR

department that responded to her repeated offers of collaboration with something close to silence, and the chronic experience of knowing her work was not treated as foundational to the institution's operations in the way she believed it should be. She described herself as very much on an island, and that image, isolated, self-sufficient, without backup or succession, captured the structural reality precisely.

The emotional texture of her experience was one of transformation through adversity. She was done dirty more than once, decisions made without her, constraints imposed rather than negotiated, and she processed the anger and resentment that arrived with those moments before finding her way to something more sustaining. Her personal life had sharpened her sense of stakes in ways the professional context alone could not: her multiracial son had experienced racist incidents that affected his mental health profoundly, her family had been targeted for her daughter's advocacy, and she carried those realities into every conversation about belonging on campus with a mother's precision about what harm actually costs. Her diagnosed anxiety and panic disorder were part of her story from early in her career, and she held them as part of who she was rather than as things to be managed out of sight.

Her strategies were relational and expansive. She went on a listening tour when her institution chose not to communicate formally about the office name change, trusting relationship over announcement and earning the trust that made subsequent coalition building possible. She partnered naturally with Student Affairs from day one, leveraging her background to build the lateral infrastructure her formal position lacked. She created a Community and Belonging Fellows program, beginning from a place of anger at a decision made without her, and transforming it into something she was genuinely proud of, because the impact of student leaders on other students was more profound than anything she could accomplish as an individual

administrator. She also designed physical spaces, sensory sensitive rooms, all gender restrooms, accessible design built into new buildings from the architectural stage, embedding equity into the institution's infrastructure in ways that would outlast any single personnel decision.

Her forward orientation is grounded and ready. Her late father spent his career in human resources, and his counsel, keep your resume updated, be confident you are ready to pivot, became her inheritance for navigating a professional landscape that could no longer promise stability. She holds that readiness not as anxiety but as freedom: the ability to stay genuinely because she wants to, without the distortion that comes from believing she has no choice. She is grateful for the flexibility her role affords her and the work it allows her to do, and that gratitude is not naïveté. It is the settled clarity of someone who has earned a perspective that institutions rarely reward but cannot take away.

The participant profiles provide the idiographic foundation for the findings that follow. They show how each leader entered the work through a distinct professional path, institutional location, and set of lived commitments. They also make visible the meaning-making that shaped how participants interpreted anti-DEI sentiment, institutional resistance, and their own roles within those conditions. The thematic analysis that follows builds from these individual accounts into a cross-case interpretation of the shared patterns, tensions, and variations across the study. Together, the four themes trace how participants navigated hostile and ambiguous conditions, absorbed the costs of that navigation, developed strategies to keep equity work moving, and made meaning from the identities, convictions, and futures that sustained them.

Presentation of Themes

The four themes presented in this chapter were constructed through sustained engagement with participants' meaning-making, interpreted through the combined lenses of my

conceptual framework. Themes are designed to keep participant voice central while making visible the structural conditions that shape what CDOs can do, what they cannot do, and what they must carry. Table 5 provides an overview of the four themes and twelve subthemes, showing the chapter’s analytic progression from hostile institutional conditions to embodied harm, to resistant strategy, to the identity and meaning-making practices that sustained participants’ work.

Table 5: Four Theme Overview

Theme	Theme Title	Analytic Function in the Chapter	Subthemes	Primary Frameworks
1	Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility	The hostile institutional terrain participants had to navigate.	1a. Speaking in Code to Keep the Work Alive 1b. The Bosses’ Double Talk and Their Fearful Retreat 1c. An Office of One, a Voice Unheard	CRT (interest convergence, counter-storytelling); Ray’s Racialized Organizations; Sensemaking
2	Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal	The embodied, emotional, and identity-based costs of that navigation.	2a. Moving Through Molasses: The Cost to Our Bodies and Minds 2b. Internal Treason and the Sting of Betrayal 2c. Our Identities as the Bullseye	CRT (embodiment, racial tax); Ray’s Racialized Organizations; Sensemaking
3	Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness	The resistant strategies participants deployed in response to constraint.	3a. Our Co-Conspirators and Lifelines: Building Bridges, Not Burning Them 3b. The Receipts and the Heartbeats: Making Them Listen 3c. Baking It In: Making Equity Part of Everything	Political Astuteness Theory; Sensemaking (enactment); Ray’s Racialized Organizations
4	Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis	The identity, meaning-making, and hope that sustained resistance and opened imagined futures.	4a. Filling Our Cups, Guarding Our Peace 4b. The Unapologetic Core of Who We Are 4c. A Sinking Ship or a New Horizon? Questioning Our Path	CRT (counter-storytelling methodology); Sensemaking (identity and future orientation)

As established in Chapter Three, the analysis accompanying each theme moves through the conceptual framework’s nested structure. Each theme is read first through the structural conditions CRT helps name, then through the organizational mechanisms Ray (2019) identifies, then through the strategic competencies described by Hartley et al. (2015, 2019), and finally through the sensemaking that threaded through participants’ accounts (Weick, 1995). The weight of each theory shifts as participants’ own focus shifts across the arc of their experience. CRT provides the broader critical lens for examining how race, power, institutional legitimacy, and

dominant narratives shape participants' experiences in higher education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). When this chapter brings in a specific CRT tenet, it names the tenet at work and cites the scholars most closely associated with that concept. These include interest convergence, which helps explain how institutional support for equity often becomes conditional on institutional benefit (Bell, 1992), intersectionality, which clarifies how participants' experiences were shaped through overlapping structures of race, gender, role, and institutional power (Crenshaw, 1989), endemic racism, which frames racism as ordinary and embedded within educational structures rather than exceptional or isolated (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and counter-storytelling, which illuminates how participants' narratives challenged dominant institutional accounts of equity work and its value (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The four themes move from structure, to harm, to agency, and finally to the forms of meaning-making that made endurance possible. The analysis begins where participants themselves often began, with the hostile terrain they had to read before they could act within it. Anti-DEI sentiment entered participants' daily work through coded expectations, leadership retreat, institutional instability, and the conditional legitimacy of the CDO role itself. This pattern brings interest convergence into view because participants described institutional support for equity as strongest when it could be aligned with reputation, compliance, risk management, or public-facing institutional interests (Bell, 1992). Theme One, *Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance*, examines how participants made sense of this terrain and how, under conditions of surveillance and constraint, they worked to keep equity commitments alive.

Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility

Theme One captures how anti-DEI hostility entered participants' institutions as a sustained organizational condition. Participants described a daily practice of performing the

compliance their institutions needed to display while continuing to enact the equity work those same institutions were becoming less willing to defend publicly. Across all ten cases, institutional commitments to equity remained in motion through translation, softened language, rebranding, careful sequencing, and strategic repositioning. Within this study's conceptual framework, these accounts show how racialized organizations contain equity work when external pressure rises, how leadership commitment becomes conditional when DEI carries political cost, and how CDOs are often asked to lead equity work from roles with limited authority, protection, and resources.

The phrase performing compliance, enacting resistance emerged from the convergence of participants' accounts of what equity work had come to require. Several participants described linguistic recalibration as central to keeping the work alive. Hewa carried critical race theory silently into meetings, preserving the framework while releasing the vocabulary that had once made it nameable. Roho arrived at a new working vocabulary in which words like community could do the work that more direct equity language could no longer do publicly. Moto identified equity-related terms that had become politically risky, and Busara described the daily practice of finding alternative nomenclature and vetting language in advance for possible reaction. Together, these accounts show how participants preserved the substance of equity work by changing how it could be spoken.

Other participants emphasized institutional rebranding and preemptive compliance. Maji described her institution as taking a proactive stance toward the rebrand, using the moment to set its own terms rather than simply absorb external pressure. Ardhi named the pressure to reduce both the visibility and the energy of programs she had built over many years. Huruma captured the shared pattern when she described stakeholders openly naming the rebrand as preemptive

compliance. Subira added another layer by describing the surveillance that shaped everyday communication, including the need to redirect sensitive conversations away from institutional email. Across these accounts, adaptation became both a survival strategy and a sign of how deeply anti-DEI pressure had entered institutional life.

Mwerevu and Ulinzi brought the structural isolation underneath these adaptations into sharper view. Mwerevu described himself as structurally alone in the role, while Ulinzi described her position as adjacent to institutional power while still disconnected from it. Their accounts clarify the organizational cost of the double movement named in this theme. Participants were carrying equity commitments into rooms where those commitments could no longer announce themselves, preserving the analysis while recalibrating the language, and absorbing the costs of doing both at once. Performing compliance, enacting resistance names that double movement at the level of daily institutional life.

Three interlocking subthemes organize participants' meaning-making within this theme. Subtheme 1a, *Speaking in Code to Keep the Work Alive*, traces the strategic linguistic recalibration through which participants reframed, translated, and rebranded equity commitments in forms their institutions would read as permissible. Subtheme 1b, *The Bosses' Double Talk and Their Fearful Retreat*, examines how participants interpreted the fragility of institutional commitment as leaders publicly affirmed equity while privately retreating when political cost rose. Subtheme 1c, *An Office of One, a Voice Unheard*, surfaces the material conditions under which these navigations took place, including constrained authority, positional isolation, and limited resources. Across these subthemes, participants engaged in sustained interpretive labor, reading their institutions like weather as they tracked shifts in tone, watched for signs of cover, and noticed who stepped back when equity work became politically inconvenient.

This theme surfaces a form of institutional practice that higher education often renders invisible. Participants experienced anti-DEI hostility as an everyday organizational condition rather than distant politics. Their accounts trace the gap between what institutions claim and what they are willing to protect, and they show how DEI leaders are often asked to absorb political risk on behalf of commitments the institution still wants to claim as values.

Speaking in Code to Keep the Work Alive

The language of speaking in code names the most concrete form Theme One took in participants' daily practice. Participants performed compliance at the level of vocabulary while enacting resistance through the equity commitments that the revised vocabulary continued to carry. Across the accounts, speaking in code appeared in three related forms. Some participants translated the language of the work. Others rebranded programs and practices to keep them institutionally viable. Still others moved sensitive conversations into safer channels when ordinary institutional communication became risky.

Mwerevu's account makes the shared practice visible in a direct way.

We have pivoted...we don't want to do anything that focuses too much, or has too much attention on any DEI related things, or could be perceived as so, and so now, it has to be kind of marketed and thought about differently, because they don't want to not draw too much attention. (Mwerevu, Interview 2)

Mwerevu is reading the environment for signals about safety, legitimacy, and consequence before deciding how to speak. That reading becomes a leadership act, and he keeps the work alive by recalibrating language, sequencing action carefully, and anticipating institutional reaction before it arrives. Weick's sensemaking concept of extracted cues helps clarify this interpretive labor because Mwerevu is sorting what the institution will tolerate before committing to a move (Weick, 1995). In his account, performing compliance and enacting

resistance converge inside the decision to market and reframe the work. The visible surface shifts toward what the institution can accept, while the equity purpose underneath remains intact.

His use of the word “marketed” also carries interpretive weight. The word places conviction-driven work inside the language of persuasion, surfaces, and audience management. Mwerevu is describing the discomfort of having to make equity work palatable to an institution that might otherwise reject it. The subtheme tracks this gap across participants, where the language of compliance becomes the route through which the work can continue.

Hewa’s account shows this same pattern through the quiet preservation of an analytic framework that had become politically unsafe to name.

Since we're not able to use these terms anymore, I can't say I'm using critical race theory in the workplace. People don't think that I am — but this work is about listening to others, and CRT is a great lens for understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of everyone. There's an assumption by one particular anti-DEI person on my campus that I'm no longer using it. (Hewa, Interview 2)

Hewa’s account shows a disciplined form of speaking in code. She has learned the rules of the environment well enough to operate inside them while keeping the framework that gives her practice coherence. CRT continues to shape how she listens, how she reads marginalization, and how she interprets what is happening in the room. The vocabulary has been surrendered, while the analysis remains active.

This is also where the subtheme becomes more than language adaptation. Hewa is continuing to use a framework that someone on her campus believes has been successfully removed. The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling clarifies this move because Hewa’s practice challenges the dominant institutional account that eliminating the language also eliminates the analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ray’s mechanism of whiteness as a credential also helps explain why some frameworks become marked as risky while others remain institutionally

legible as neutral or professional (Ray, 2019). In Hewa's case, speaking in code allows the equity framework to survive by becoming less visible to those positioned to constrain it.

Roho's account adds the experience of rupture. She describes the moment when the discursive terrain changed and language that once felt available became newly risky.

We went from being explicit — talking about microaggressions, talking about exclusivity, naming whiteness, naming all kinds of things in a clear and open way. Not to say people wouldn't blanch sometimes, but for the most part, you were free to do that. Now I'm questioning: what words can I use instead of that? (Roho, Interview 1)

Roho's question captures the disorientation of having to continue the work after its language has been destabilized. She remembers a prior period when the intellectual tools of her practice and the language available to her were more closely aligned. She could name microaggressions, exclusivity, and whiteness directly. The work still carried friction, but the naming was possible.

Her question, "what words can I use instead of that?" shows the exact point where speaking in code begins. Roho is trying to locate a new vocabulary quickly enough to keep the work from losing coherence. Hartley et al.'s strategic direction competency helps clarify this moment because Roho is adapting to a changed political environment while trying to maintain her longer equity commitments (Hartley et al., 2015). Ray's mechanism of racial decoupling is also visible because the institution can maintain a formal commitment to equity while the everyday conditions for naming equity become narrower and more constrained (Ray, 2019). Speaking in code becomes the daily practice required to hold that contradiction.

Where Roho narrates the experience of rupture, Busara narrates the response to it, the deliberate, calculated work of substituting language in ways that keep equity moving without making it a target for the forces that disrupted the terrain Roho described.

Because we know what has happened at other institutions, you have to think more intentionally about what is likely to raise eyebrows or provoke a reaction in certain pockets. You have to ask yourself: how do I rebrand this? How do I refer to the work

we're doing using different nomenclature? That has definitely been part of the experience. (Busara, Interview 2)

Busara is scanning the broader field and using what has happened at other institutions to anticipate what might provoke reaction in her own. Her account shows political astuteness as anticipatory practice. She reads peer institutional losses, studies where reaction is likely to emerge, and makes decisions about language, timing, and framing before the work becomes vulnerable. Hartley et al.'s scanning and strategic direction competencies are especially visible here because Busara is converting field-level knowledge into protective institutional action (Hartley et al., 2015).

The phrase “different nomenclature” shows how compliance and resistance occupy different layers of the same action. The rebranded language performs compliance. The work that continues beneath that language enacts resistance. Ray's mechanism concerning the unequal distribution of organizational resources helps clarify the burden placed on Busara because the institution's tolerance for equity depends on whether the work can travel under language that reduces institutional exposure (Ray, 2019). In this form, speaking in code becomes a threshold practice. Busara has to know how close the work can come to visibility while still remaining viable.

Ardhi names a deeper cost of speaking in code. In her account, the adaptation reaches beyond vocabulary and begins to reshape the public presence of the work itself.

We've had to dampen both our visibility and the fervor with which we do this work. Even long-standing programs, teach-ins and other opportunities we've built over time, are being diluted, so as not to be misperceived as running afoul of the new federal guidance. (Ardhi, Interview 1)

Ardhi's use of the word “dampen” shows how speaking in code can move from language into structure. The institution is asking her to reduce the visibility, intensity, and scale of work

that had been built over time. The cost is therefore relational as well as programmatic. Teach-ins and long-standing programs carry accumulated trust, labor, and participation, and their dilution affects the infrastructure that made the work meaningful in the first place.

Her use of the word “fervor” also matters because it names the life force of the work. The institution is asking her to lower the public energy of programs she still believes in. Compliance appears through reduced visibility and diluted programming. Resistance remains in her continued commitment to the purpose those programs were built to serve. Ray’s mechanism of the unequal distribution of organizational resources is visible here because the institution redistributes the burden of managing political and legal risk onto the equity leader, requiring Ardhi to constrain her own work in order to keep it viable (Ray, 2019). Speaking in code becomes the price of preserving any public form of the work.

Other participants described this same compliance-resistance split through different orientations. Subira framed the pivot as a pragmatic route through academic review structures and competency frameworks, which allowed the work to move through safer institutional channels. Maji understood rebranding as an opportunity to exercise agency and reformulate a more empowering narrative on her institution’s own terms. Ulinzi described the shift as a chance to build new language for inclusive community from the ground up, while still insisting that the work itself remained intact. Huruma offered the clearest expression of this distinction.

When people ask me how things are going, I say that it's challenging, but we are staying true. That's what I say, and it's true, that's what we're doing. We're having to pivot, but we're still going to do this. We're just going to do it in a safer way.
(Huruma, Interview 2)

Huruma separates the form of the work from the commitment underneath it. The language and methods have shifted, while the purpose remains intact. Her phrase “staying true” gives the subtheme its moral center. It shows that speaking in code can become a way to protect fidelity to

the work. Weick's sensemaking is visible here because Huruma makes sense of the contradiction through continued action, learning how to pivot while preserving the meaning of the work (Weick, 1995). Performing compliance and enacting resistance become simultaneous working principles in her account.

Moto extends the subtheme into the infrastructure of communication itself.

I remember hearing from colleagues at state institutions. I would email them, and they would reply, "do you have a cell phone or a personal email address?" From there they would say, "I cannot reply to your email because there is too much risk. Big Brother is watching." Hearing those things made it clear that there was real anxiety out there. (Moto, Interview 1)

Moto describes a form of speaking in code that moves beyond word choice. In his account, the channel of communication becomes part of the strategy. Colleagues reroute conversations away from institutional email because ordinary professional communication has become exposed. Compliance appears in the avoidance of an institutional digital trail and resistance continues through the exchange of information, strategy, and support through safer channels.

Hewa's account shows a related pattern through her use of Signal groups, listservs, and trusted professional networks. These spaces helped her gather information, interpret legal and policy shifts, and stay connected to colleagues who were also trying to understand what the changing landscape meant for practice. The need for these networks shows how formal institutional communication had become constrained. Ray's mechanism of racial decoupling helps clarify this pattern because institutions can retain formal commitments to equity while the everyday conditions for discussing equity become narrowed, monitored, or displaced into informal channels (Ray, 2019).

Across this subtheme, participants shared the need to speak in code, yet their relationship to that practice varied. Maji, Busara, Huruma, and Subira often described translation as a

practiced competency shaped by experience, relational capital, and positional stability. Ardhi, Hewa, and Moto described the same practice as more tightly bound to surveillance, exposure, and the burden of being already marked by the work or by identity. The CRT tenet of intersectionality clarifies this variation because the same structural demand landed differently depending on how race, gender, role, and institutional power converged around each participant (Crenshaw, 1989). Speaking in code was a shared condition, while the risks of doing so were unevenly distributed.

Subtheme 1a therefore shows how performing compliance and enacting resistance became a linguistic, programmatic, and communicative practice. Participants translated language, softened visibility, rerouted communication, and reframed programs to keep equity work alive under hostile and ambiguous conditions. Across the accounts, the pattern is clear. Speaking in code allowed participants to protect the substance of the work when naming the work directly had become politically risky.

Yet speaking in code is not cost-free, and the analysis should not let the language of preservation settle the question of what is preserved. When explicit naming disappears, it disappears for everyone, including the students, staff, and junior colleagues for whom an institution's willingness to name racism plainly had been a form of recognition. Subira's account already registers this cost from the other side: the junior faculty of color who experienced his strategic discretion as betrayal were responding to a silence that, from where they stood, was indistinguishable from abandonment. Roho's word "traitorous" names the same fracture from inside the leader who must enact it. Here the critique of liberalism cuts in two directions at once (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The institution's euphemism is retreat; the CDO's euphemism is offered as resistance; and the distance between them can be difficult to locate from the position

of those the work is meant to serve. The literature on strategic adaptation warns precisely about this threshold, cautioning that protective reframing can shade into the normalization of minimal compliance, letting anti-DEI pressure set the terms under which equity is allowed to survive (Castillo et al., 2024; Meikle & Morris, 2022). Participants' code-switching kept the work moving; it may also, in some institutions and for some constituencies, have helped institutions appear committed while doing less.

The Bosses' Double Talk and Their Fearful Retreat

The phrase double talk emerged from the gap participants described between what institutional leaders said about equity and what they were willing to protect when the work became politically, financially, or reputationally costly. Roho named this gap as the distance between explicit and implicit messaging, where the public message affirmed DEI while the private message made her feel present "pro forma," represented but unheard, while Mwerevu described leaders who "say one thing but they're not doing it," and Moto described administrators who "kept a good front" while equity commitments were privately dismantled. The phrase fearful retreat names the second part of the pattern, with Huruma describing an early institutional response shaped by the impulse to "just be safe," and Busara watching colleagues ask to remove DEI from their own titles because "they were concerned for their livelihood." Across these accounts, participants were reading a shared institutional condition in which equity could be proclaimed publicly while being constrained privately, and that gap was driven by fear of exposure, donor reaction, board pressure, and reputational risk. Mwerevu's account shows how participants learned to read leadership behavior as evidence of the institution's actual priorities.

I always said, I know layoffs are coming, so what do you want from me? And they're good at performing, saying "no, you are very important, we love you." But their actions

aren't speaking to that. Resources aren't speaking to that. People are recognizing it, they say one thing but they're not doing it. They want to appease their audience, and a lot of their audiences are leaning one way, but they also don't want to lose funding, they don't want donors to be upset. So, they're trying to occupy the middle ground, but they're not. They're just saying they are. (Mwerevu, Interview 1)

Mwerevu names double talk as a leadership practice organized around appeasement, in which the institution performs care for the CDO role while its actions, resources, and risk calculations communicate something else. His interpretation is sharp because he reads institutional commitment through behavior rather than affirmation, and what leaders say matters less than what they fund, protect, and sustain when pressure rises. Interest convergence clarifies the structural logic of Mwerevu's interpretation because institutional support for equity appears strongest when it aligns with institutional interests such as donor confidence, funding stability, audience management, and reputational protection (Bell, 1992). In his account, fearful retreat appears when equity begins to threaten those interests, and the institution tries to occupy a middle ground that Mwerevu reads as performance. This is the heart of the subtheme, in which the double talk is the public language of commitment and the retreat is the private recalibration around risk. Participants converged around this same hard truth in different forms, with institutional leaders who could speak the language of equity when it was ceremonial, mission-facing, or strategically safe, and that language thinned when the stakes rose. In the accounts of Mwerevu, Moto, and Hewa, support softened, stalled, and went quiet at the very moments when the work required courage, and where Mwerevu reads double talk as a condition to manage, Moto shows what happens when that condition becomes something he refuses to keep absorbing.

Suddenly it turned into, I need to cower before this altar of public opinion. Cower before the board. Cower before the risk of political action. And then, very publicly, they would declare, we care about these things, we see these things, we value these things. They kept a good front. But behind the scenes, you would see things happening. You would see things get dismantled. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto names the moral structure of fearful retreat, in which the institution presents equity commitment in public while making different decisions behind the scenes, and his repetition of "cower" matters because it locates the retreat in fear of public opinion, board reaction, and political exposure. The institution's public front remains intact, while the private infrastructure of the work is weakened. Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice helps explain why this pattern was so recognizable across participants' accounts, since institutions can maintain formal commitments to equity while everyday practices quietly protect the arrangements that equity work might challenge (Ray, 2019). Moto's account gives that mechanism an emotional and organizational texture, leaving the CDO to manage the gap between what the institution claims and what it dismantles.

Moto's account also marks a turning point because he reads the gap between rhetoric and courage as evidence of institutional abandonment, and his experience sits at one end of the institutional support spectrum in this study while Subira's sits at the other. Subira described a president and board that embedded equity accountability into governance structures that remained intact as external pressure intensified, and this contrast matters because the difference across participants was shaped by more than individual resilience or skill. It was shaped by whether equity commitments had been built into governance structures or left dependent on the courage of individual leaders.

Hewa's account adds another layer by showing how fearful retreat often became preemptive, with the institution responding to anticipated scrutiny before any formal challenge arrived.

There's a lot of fear within our organization that we might lose grant funding, so there are a lot of concessions being made. Because we don't want to be seen as engaging in illegal DEI, even though internally, all of us know that we're not. (Hewa, Interview 1)

Hewa names the gap between what institutional leaders know and how they behave, since they know the work is lawful, yet they act as though the accusation of "illegal DEI" already carries the force of a finding. That gap produces a particular burden for CDOs, who are asked to reduce work that remains legally unchallenged and soften language that carries no formal prohibition. The critique of liberalism and colorblindness helps clarify what is happening in this preemptive compliance, because the institution is treating lawful equity work as if it were already illegitimate, which is the logic of colorblind formalism enforcing itself through anticipated rather than actual sanction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Weick's concept of plausibility over accuracy clarifies the interpretive move that makes such compliance feel reasonable, because the institution is acting on what feels credible as a threat rather than what has been established as true (Weick, 1995). Interest convergence is also visible because the institution protects its own perceived alignment with funders and regulators before a formal challenge exists, making preemptive retreat appear prudent while shifting the cost onto the equity work and the leader charged with sustaining it (Bell, 1992). Hewa's account shows fearful retreat operating through anticipation, in which the institution begins withdrawing before it is required to do so.

Roho names the threshold underneath this pattern with particular clarity.

It feels like the commitment to DEI is real, up until we have to make valued decisions. When we're faced with really tough choices, like will this offend a donor? Will this affect a funding stream? Will this expose us to liability? That's when the line gets drawn. (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho identifies the point where institutional commitment meets institutional self-protection, in which the commitment holds until it becomes costly, and the cost is measured through donor relationships, funding streams, and liability concerns. Her account shows a leader who has learned the institution's actual tolerance for equity work by watching where the line gets drawn.

Hartley et al.'s competency of reading people and situations helps explain Roho's interpretive clarity because she is assessing interests, power dynamics, and unstated thresholds before they are formally named (Hartley et al., 2015). Ray's mechanism concerning the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources along racialized lines also helps clarify what Roho has read, since equity labor is authorized when it is low cost and reputationally useful, and it becomes constrained when it requires the institution to absorb risk to the relationships and resources it is organized to protect (Ray, 2019).

Participants differed in what they did once they understood the retreat, with Mwerevu, Hewa, and Roho treating it as a structural condition to interpret and work around. Mwerevu read appeasement, Hewa read preemptive fear, and Roho read the institution's threshold for cost. Ardhi held a different position, since she understood the strategic logic of concession while continuing to ask whether concession made her complicit in the erosion of civil and human rights, and her stance matters because it keeps the moral question alive inside the strategy itself. In this subtheme, resistance appears through interpretation, through refusal, and through the decision to keep asking what institutional caution costs.

Maji and Subira described a different institutional experience, one that created more room to act. Subira described a president and board that built equity accountability into governance structures through transparency dashboards and board-level reporting, and in his account, staying true was supported by institutional design rather than left only to individual resolve. Maji described a supportive president whose backing allowed her to practice what she called "tempered radicalism," including going directly to the president when a hostile provost blocked access. Hartley et al.'s competency of building alignment and alliances helps explain the difference because Maji and Subira had cultivated durable relationships with people who held

institutional authority (Hartley et al., 2015), and their accounts show that leadership support becomes most durable when it is translated into structures, relationships, and accountability practices that distribute responsibility across the institution.

Across this subtheme, participants were making sense of the difference between stated values and protected values. Double talk taught them to listen past public affirmation and read actions, resources, silence, timing, and risk behavior, and fearful retreat taught them that institutional support could narrow quickly when equity threatened donor confidence, board comfort, legal reputation, or public standing. These readings shaped what participants did next, since they influenced what they said in public, where they placed trust, which relationships they built, and how they judged the institution's capacity to stand behind the work.

If Subtheme 1a traced how CDOs navigated the narrowing of what equity work could be called, Subtheme 1b shows how they interpreted the fragility of institutional commitment once that narrowing began. Subtheme 1c moves into the material conditions under which both forms of navigation occurred, where participants were doing this interpretive and strategic work from roles that were often structurally isolated, under-resourced, and organized in ways that concentrated institution-wide equity responsibility in one person without providing the authority, staffing, or infrastructure that responsibility required.

An Office of One, a Voice Unheard

Across accounts, participants described being asked to carry institution-wide equity commitments with very little infrastructure behind them, including limited staff, constrained budgets, inconsistent access to leadership, unclear authority, and collaboration that depended on personal persuasion rather than institutional design. What emerged was a pattern in which equity leaders were expected to symbolize institutional commitment while being denied the conditions

needed to enact it. Ray's mechanism describing the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources along racialized lines helps name this arrangement, since the CDO role could be installed, displayed, and rhetorically affirmed while its reach was constrained by the same institution that created it (Ray, 2019). The phrase an office of one surfaced across participant accounts with striking consistency, with Huruma naming the condition plainly when she said, "I'm very much on an island," and Mwerevu describing his physical and relational reality in similar terms when he said, "I am an island on my own." Ulinzi called herself "a floating island under the president," Roho asked with quiet disbelief how the institution expected the work to get done when her unit was "beyond tiny," and Maji explained that she "didn't inherit a division," only "a role," which left her spending five years building what should have existed from the beginning. The phrase a voice unheard emerged through a related pattern, as participants described losing access to the spaces where institutional direction was set, having their expertise misrecognized, or watching commitments evaporate when leadership conditions changed. Together, these accounts show a shared institutional arrangement in which the CDO role was visible, while the authority, staffing, and infrastructure required to make the role effective remained withheld. Roho's account opens this pattern in a human and practical place, beginning with disbelief at what she is being asked to carry.

My unit is beyond tiny. I keep asking myself, how do they think this work is actually going to get done? The message is clear, good programming, and don't spend any money. Good programming, and don't spend any money. (Roho, Interview 1)

Roho identifies an institutional fantasy that equity work can be requested on demand without funding the conditions that make it possible, in which the institution expects programming, consultation, climate work, committee labor, crisis response, and representation while withholding the staffing, budget, and authority required to do that work with integrity. Her

repeated phrase, "good programming, and don't spend any money," carries the exhaustion of someone who has heard the contradiction often enough that its absurdity has become routine. Her question, "how do they think this work is actually going to get done?" functions as an act of sensemaking, since she is trying to construct a plausible account of an institutional arrangement that does not add up, and Weick's concept of sensemaking helps clarify this moment because Roho is responding to the gap between what the institution expects and what the institution has made possible (Weick, 1995). The CRT tenet of endemic, structural racism helps name the deeper condition underneath that gap, since equity can be declared a priority while the resources needed to operationalize it remain systematically withheld (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The critique of liberalism and colorblindness sharpens this further, since the institution's expectation of equity outcomes without redistribution of resources is the operating logic of colorblind formalism, which treats commitment as sufficient and treats material investment as separable from the work (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ray's mechanism describing the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources clarifies the organizational practice through which that condition is sustained, as equity work is affirmed in principle while the material supports that would make the affirmation actionable remain unevenly allocated (Ray, 2019).

For Mwerevu, the problem was not only scarcity but active diminishment, since his supervisory structure misrecognized both the scope of his work and the expertise he brought to it.

The CHRO, the VP, and Director of HR, they're not content experts. They literally call me the DEI person. They sometimes refer to me as 'my office.' There's no office, full stop. I am now reporting to two people who have no clue. Every single time I give them something that they want or say they want, they find another way to say, hmm. No, let's not do that, or you need to do something different. I have yet to get a yes. (Mwerevu, Interview 1)

A related account from Mwerevu sharpens the isolation even further:

I am an island on my own, because they're over there. They are literally across the street in a different building, and I am in a totally different building. Sometimes they refer to things as my office, and I have to remind them, no, it is our office. (Mwerevu, Interview 2)

Mwerevu's account moves the subtheme from under-resourcing into misrecognized authority, since he is working inside an arrangement that claims the function of equity leadership while avoiding genuine partnership in it, and being called "the DEI person," having supervisors refer to the work as "my office," and receiving repeated refusals to his recommendations all communicate the same institutional message that the role has been installed while trust in the person occupying it has been withheld. The island language matters because it joins the spatial and relational dimensions of isolation, since Mwerevu is literally across the street from the people supervising him, yet the distance he describes is also organizational, created through decisions made without him, recommendations that stall, and an office treated as his burden rather than the institution's responsibility. His correction from "my office" to "our office" is analytically important because it reveals what he is trying to make the institution acknowledge, namely that equity work belongs to the institution even when the institution keeps placing it back onto him. Ray's mechanism describing hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential helps clarify why Mwerevu's formal title does not automatically translate into receivable authority (Ray, 2019), since his expertise is named, managed, and contained by supervisors who lack the content knowledge to evaluate it yet still control whether his recommendations move forward. Hartley et al.'s competency of reading people and situations also helps explain what Mwerevu is doing with these repeated refusals, since he is reading where power sits, who can limit his action, and what the institution is communicating through its pattern of no (Hartley et al., 2015).

The same pattern appears when Mwerevu describes losing access to the president, since his statement that he no longer has "the President's ear" carries the weight of positional diminishment, with formal presence in the role remaining intact while meaningful influence over institutional direction has narrowed. In this subtheme, a voice unheard means more than being ignored, since it captures the experience of being positioned close enough to carry responsibility while remaining far enough away from power that the responsibility cannot be fully enacted.

Ulinzi's account shows a different version of the same condition, since her role appears close to power on the organizational chart even as the infrastructure underneath it remains absent.

I'm tasked to foster a culture of belonging, while struggling with finding belonging myself. I'm a floating island under the president, with nobody else to structurally work with. I have to collaborate with everyone on campus, but I'm always the one who has to lead everything I collaborate on. Which leaves me very isolated up here, while everyone else is volunteering their time to contribute to what I do. (Ulinzi, Interview 1)

Ulinzi's "floating island" captures the paradox of proximity without structure, since she sits near the top of the organizational chart yet lacks the lateral support that would allow the role to function over time, and her work depends on voluntary cooperation from colleagues, which means collaboration becomes another form of labor she has to initiate, coordinate, and sustain. The title gives the appearance of access, while the day-to-day structure leaves her alone. Her second account shows how fragile this arrangement becomes when leadership and funding conditions shift.

I've been in this role as a department of one. I was always working toward the director level, always working toward the promotion to executive director, toward building a team. In the first week of this year, I negotiated with my president, and they were totally on board with all of it. And then inauguration happened. The administration changed. Funding was cut everywhere. And none of what I had negotiated is happening. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi had done the relational, strategic, and persuasive labor required to build support, and the president was "totally on board," yet the commitment disappeared when the broader climate changed, and her account shows that institutional support for equity infrastructure can remain contingent even after agreement has been secured. Interest convergence helps clarify this pattern because support for equity remains strongest when it does not require the institution to absorb real cost (Bell, 1992), and Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice also clarifies how the formal appearance of commitment can remain in place while the everyday conditions needed to enact that commitment become unstable or disappear (Ray, 2019).

Across Roho, Mwerevu, and Ulinzi, this subtheme shows how the CDO role could be made visible while the conditions required to make it effective remained fragile, with Roho naming the contradiction of expected outputs without resources, Mwerevu naming the diminishment of authority and expertise, and Ulinzi naming proximity to power without the structure needed to act. Together, their accounts show how an office of one becomes a voice unheard, since participants were made responsible for institution-wide equity commitments while too often being underbuilt, underheard, and under-authorized to carry the work with the integrity it required.

This language of constraint must also be held alongside a countervailing finding that becomes more visible in the later themes. Several of these same participants went on to endow offices, rewrite bylaws, redirect funding lines, and place equity on board agendas. Precarity and leverage coexisted within the same roles. Naming constraint without anticipating that leverage could leave the reader with a partial image of the CDO as structurally powerless. Theme Three develops a fuller picture of leaders who were under-resourced and institutionally significant at

the same time, positioned at the margins of some rooms while exercising meaningful authority in others. I introduce that tension here so the precarity documented in this subtheme is understood as one dimension of the role rather than its full account.

Cross-Case Analysis of Theme One: Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility

Across the three subthemes of Theme One, participants described anti-DEI hostility as something that had moved inside the daily operations of their institutions, as it shaped what could be said, what could be protected, who would stand behind the work, and what resources would be made available to carry it. The central cross-case finding is that participants came to understand institutional support for equity as conditional, given that such support remained strongest when equity could be aligned with mission language, reputation, compliance, donor confidence, or public-facing institutional identity, and it became more fragile when equity required the institution to absorb political, financial, relational, or reputational risk. Participants did not arrive at this understanding through one isolated incident; rather, they arrived there through repeated encounters with shifted language, softened commitments, leadership retreat, diminished access, and withheld infrastructure.

The three subthemes show how that conditionality operated at different levels of institutional life. In Subtheme 1a, participants learned that equity work could continue only when its language was translated, softened, rebranded, or moved into safer channels, and speaking in code allowed them to preserve the substance of the work while changing its public form. In Subtheme 1b, participants read leadership behavior as evidence of the limits of institutional courage, and public affirmation and private retreat taught them to listen beyond stated values and attend to what leaders would fund, defend, and protect. In Subtheme 1c, participants confronted

the material conditions underneath both forms of navigation, including small offices, thin budgets, unclear authority, and limited access to decision-making spaces. Together, the subthemes show that performing compliance and enacting resistance was a layered institutional practice in which participants adjusted language, interpreted leadership signals, and carried institution-wide responsibility from roles that were often underbuilt for the work they were expected to sustain.

The most consistent pattern across all ten participants was the recognition that equity leadership required continuous interpretation before action, because participants had to read the room, the institution, the political climate, donor pressure, leadership silence, resource decisions, and the shifting boundaries of acceptable language before deciding how to move. This interpretive labor was a form of sensemaking, in that participants tried to understand what their institutions were communicating through behavior, timing, tone, and omission as much as through formal statements (Weick, 1995), and it threaded through every subtheme as the connective tissue between what participants noticed and what they did next. It was also a form of political astuteness, given that participants assessed power, anticipated reaction, recalibrated strategy, and maintained direction under constraint, and the competency of reading people and situations carried weight as participants learned to detect institutional thresholds before those thresholds were named (Hartley et al., 2015). Across cases, participants were not simply reacting to anti-DEI hostility; instead, they were reading the conditions of institutional permission in real time.

CRT helps clarify why the conditions participants described were patterned rather than incidental. The tenet of endemic, structural racism is visible in how institutions could claim equity as a value while repeatedly withholding the language, authority, resources, and protection

that would allow equity work to function with integrity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Interest convergence is also visible across the theme, as institutional support for equity strengthened when the work served institutional interests and weakened when it threatened donor relationships, board comfort, political safety, or reputational standing (Bell, 1992). The critique of liberalism and colorblindness sharpens both observations, because the institutional pressure to translate equity work into race-neutral, viewpoint-balanced, or compliance-friendly language is the colorblind formalism that CRT names as a structural problem rather than a neutral starting point (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Together, these tenets help show that the instability participants described was connected to broader racialized patterns in institutional life rather than to isolated leadership inconsistency.

Ray's organizational mechanisms sharpen this analysis by showing how institutions managed equity work through structure and practice. The racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice appeared when institutions maintained formal commitments to equity while narrowing the everyday conditions under which equity could be named, resourced, or enacted (Ray, 2019). The legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources along racialized lines appeared when participants were asked to carry institution-wide responsibilities without the staffing, budgets, or authority that comparable institutional priorities would require (Ray, 2019). Hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential appeared when participants' expertise could be formally recognized through title while still being questioned, contained, or made less receivable in practice (Ray, 2019). Across the theme, the CDO role was often visible enough to symbolize commitment and constrained enough to limit the institutional change that commitment implied.

The cross-case variation is equally important because participants did not make the same meaning from the same conditions. One group, including Maji, Busara, Huruma, and Subira, described translation as a practiced and manageable form of leadership, and their accounts often reflected accumulated institutional experience, relational capital, and, in some cases, stronger presidential or board-level support. Hartley et al.'s competency of building alignment and alliances helps clarify why translation operated as a manageable practice for these participants, since durable relationships with people who held formal authority gave them institutional ground to stand on when language had to shift (Hartley et al., 2015). For these participants, adapting language did not necessarily mean surrendering the work, because it often meant preserving the work through a different institutional form. A second group, including Mwerevu, Hewa, and Roho, described translation as ongoing interpretive labor that could be strategically managed while still carrying costs. Mwerevu read leadership appeasement with precision, Hewa kept her CRT-informed practice alive while allowing others to assume she had abandoned it, and Roho mapped the line where the institution's commitment ended and its self-protection began. A third orientation, most visible in Ardhi and Moto, treated translation as a moral and existential pressure. Weick's account of identity construction helps name what is happening in this third orientation, as adaptation begins to feel inseparable from the question of who one is becoming through the work (Weick, 1995). Ardhi continued to ask whether adaptation had become capitulation, while Moto read institutional retreat as a signal that the institution's public commitments could no longer be trusted in the same way.

These differences were shaped by institutional context, although institutional type did not determine the pattern. Participants in private specialized institutions often described donor influence, funding concerns, and board relationships with specific nuances, as seen in Hewa's

account of preemptive concessions around grant funding and Roho's description of donor relationships as a line where commitment became conditional. Participants in larger or more complex institutions often emphasized scale, describing the mismatch between broad institutional mandates and limited staffing, budget, and authority, and Mwerevu, Ulinzi, and Ardhi each named the strain of being assigned expansive responsibility without commensurate infrastructure. Ulinzi's public institutional context added another dimension because government oversight, state governance, and public accountability intensified the exposure attached to the CDO role. These distinctions matter because they show how a shared structural condition produced different experiences depending on the institutional environment in which participants were located.

Theme One therefore shows that performing compliance and enacting resistance was neither a single strategy nor a simple posture of survival, but rather a complex practice of equity leadership under constraint. Participants translated language, watched leadership retreat, interpreted institutional risk, managed scarce resources, built relationships where they could, and carried institutional contradictions that were rarely acknowledged by the organizations asking them to lead. Across the theme, resistance did not always look like open opposition; at times it looked like preserving the analysis beneath safer language, continuing the work after public support softened, or insisting that an office of one still represented an institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden.

This cross-case analysis also prepares the movement into Theme Two. Theme One shows the conditions participants had to navigate, while Theme Two brings into view what those conditions cost, because the strategic labor described here was carried through bodies, identities,

emotions, and relationships, and the next theme examines how participants experienced that labor as exhaustion, vigilance, estrangement, moral strain, and embodied harm.

Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal

Theme Two lays bare how navigating anti-DEI hostility accumulated as a deeply personal and embodied burden that participants carried in their bodies, minds, relationships, sleep, and sense of institutional belonging. The hostility described in Theme One entered the interior of participants' lives through exhaustion, dread, panic, moral disillusionment, constrained speech, and the ongoing pressure of being read, judged, and exposed through identity. Within this study's conceptual framework, these accounts show how racialized organizations redistribute institutional risk onto the very leaders charged with advancing equity, producing harm that is emotional, physical, relational, and moral.

The phrase embodied racial harm emerged from the language participants used when trying to describe what the work was doing to them. Maji described the work as exacting a steady and accumulating cost that surprised her, even after years of equity leadership. Roho described tracking her own thoughts in a spreadsheet at her therapist's request and finding the record bleak in ways she had not expected to see catalogued. Busara described going to the gym in place of therapy, conveying with characteristic directness that this was a literal accommodation she made to keep functioning. Huruma disclosed diagnosed anxiety, panic disorder, and depression, while also describing her office as a hybrid space where grievance work and emotional caretaking had converted into one role. Moto described breakdown that accumulated across years. Ardhi described joy foreclosed, fervor dampened, and a weight that quadrupled in heaviness rather than volume. Across these accounts, the harm settled inside the

body, the mind, and the relational life of each participant. Embodied racial harm names where institutional conditions finally arrived.

Three interlocking subthemes organize participants' meaning-making within this theme. Subtheme 2a, *Moving Through Molasses*, captures the somatic and cognitive consequences of sustained vigilance and emotional labor, tracing how exhaustion settled into bodily breakdown, temporal collapse, and cognitive fog. Subtheme 2b, *Internal Treason and the Sting of Betrayal*, illuminates the moral injuries that emerged when leaders were required to narrow, soften, or silence commitments that contradicted their deepest values, often in the presence of the very people they were charged with protecting. Subtheme 2c, *Our Identities as the Bullseye*, examines how participants' racialized, gendered, immigrant, queer, and otherwise marked identities intensified their exposure within the hostile climate, rendering their leadership hyper-visible, vulnerable, and unevenly authorized. Across these subthemes, the costs extend well beyond time and tasks, reaching into depletion, betrayal, and identity-based vulnerability that compound physically and psychologically over time.

This theme also surfaces a form of institutional harm that higher education narratives often leave unnamed. Participants described institutions that externalized their contradictions onto DEI leaders, requiring them to absorb backlash, translate retreat into palatable language, and maintain relational stability while institutional commitments wavered. The leaders who carry this work experience institutional ambivalence in their nervous systems, relationships, and sense of self, inhabiting in embodied form the gap between what institutions claim and what they are willing to defend.

Moving Through Molasses: The Cost to Our Bodies and Minds

Moving through molasses captures the slow, heavy, and effortful quality of leading equity work under sustained anti-DEI hostility. Participants continued moving, but they described that movement as increasingly difficult, watched, and costly. The phrase names forward motion under drag, where the body is implicated in every step because the work requires constant vigilance, careful calibration, and emotional containment. What once felt energizing for some participants became slower, heavier, and harder to carry because the institutional terrain demanded attention to every move.

The phrase emerged from a convergence across participant accounts. Maji explained that she had underestimated the emotional toll of engaging hostile behavior toward DEI, saying that “people don’t realize the extent to which this takes an emotional toll on you to do this work” and that she was “surprised by the depth of it.” Roho described the ground beneath her shifting as she questioned, “the ground is shifting, I’m moving, who am I?” and later defined success as simply being able to continue in the role with her team for another academic year. Busara described managing burnout through displacement, saying, “I go to the gym because I need it.” Moto and Ardhi described exhaustion as the body’s record of what the institution had extracted across years. Subira added a different texture to the pattern, offering a measured aside that he had “better weeks” after a period that included a physical threat and more than 700 threatening emails. Across these accounts, molasses names the accumulation of vigilance, slowed movement, and the cost of continuing under conditions that made every step heavier than the work itself should have been.

As a current CDO, I came to this subtheme with lived familiarity, knowing how easily exhaustion can be misread as overwork, inefficiency, or the inevitable cost of demanding

leadership. Participants described something more precise. Their fatigue carried interpretive information about what the institution was asking them to absorb. In these accounts, the body became a site of knowing, registering what the organization demanded long before the institution named it plainly.

Ardhi describes the shift with unusual precision, distinguishing between the volume of the work and the weight of it.

The workload has quadrupled, not in volume, but in weight. It's just heavy. Thinking through all the hijinks takes so much more mental and emotional energy now. The work has become so much more complicated, so much more political, so much more angsty. It simply takes more out of you. (Ardhi, Interview 1)

Ardhi's account captures a qualitative change in the work. The labor has grown heavier because every action now requires political risk calculation, documentation awareness, and anticipation of how the work may be misread or challenged. Weick's concept of extracted cues helps clarify her interpretation because Ardhi is reading the environment for signals that the terrain has shifted and that work that once moved with more energy now requires sustained self-protection and strategic bracing (Weick, 1995). Her use of "hijinks" is especially telling because it names the experience of watching the rules change while still being expected to move forward as though the game itself remained stable.

Ardhi sharpens this contrast in her second interview.

The work is now deeply exhausting. Before, it was energizing. It was joyful. It felt like we were just like moving and expanding and growing, and now it just feels so heavy. And it takes so much more mental and emotional energy to navigate the kind of backlash and opposition that we find ourselves in. (Ardhi, Interview 2)

Ardhi's contrast between joy and heaviness marks a professional era that has changed. The fatigue she names carries grief because the work has shifted from expansion and possibility into bracing, buffering, and constant calculation. Interest convergence helps clarify the structural logic of that shift because institutional alignment with equity remains strongest when equity

goals fit organizational priorities and becomes more fragile when those goals invite political cost or reputational exposure (Bell, 1992). Ardhi's exhaustion therefore reflects more than a difficult job. It reflects the bodily cost of sustaining work the institution is less willing to publicly defend.

Roho's exhaustion settles differently. Where Ardhi describes the loss of joy and the weight of political calculation, Roho describes a mind that loops continuously around belonging, legitimacy, voice, and power.

I get caught up in these loops. Am I a good leader? Should I be in this space? Is my voice being heard? Does my voice have power? Am I enough? I'm always carrying these mental gymnastics. My mind is part of the problem. It doesn't stop. It's a constant conversation, all day long. You know the show about hoarders? That's what it feels like up there sometimes. Like you've walked into a space that is just full. (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho stacks questions one after another, and that accumulation gives the reader access to the pace of her internal labor. "Mental gymnastics" names the effort of managing uncertainty while trying to remain effective, and the hoarder's metaphor gives the exhaustion spatial texture, as though the mind has become crowded with questions that cannot be put down at the end of the workday. In Roho's account, exhaustion is tied to legitimacy. She is not simply tired from tasks. She is tired from the ongoing need to assess whether her voice carries power, whether she belongs in the room, and whether any uncertainty might become another reason the work is dismissed.

Hartley et al.'s competency of reading people and situations helps clarify why Roho's mental looping functions as political risk management (Hartley et al., 2015). In a climate where credibility is conditional and mistakes can be politicized; the mind stays alert to preempt misreading. The CRT tenet of endemic racism also helps explain why this vigilance becomes intimate, as scrutiny moves inward until the leader begins carrying the institution's evaluative gaze inside her own cognition (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ulinzi's account shows what happens when a leader does much of what institutions often recommend and remains in pain. Her account matters because it challenges the assumption that individual coping can resolve harm produced by organizational conditions. She described herself as still "in pain" despite having done "so much of what people would call self-care," including more therapy, energy work, and massage than she had ever undertaken before (Ulinzi, Interview 2).

Ulinzi's account makes a precise analytic point. The harm lives in the conditions, rather than in a failure of coping. Endemic racism helps name the structural character of that harm because the strain is produced through institutional arrangements that require constant safety calculation, visibility management, and emotional containment (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ray's mechanism concerning the unequal distribution of organizational resources further clarifies how institutions can generate harm structurally and then redirect responsibility for managing that harm downward onto the individual leader (Ray, 2019). Ulinzi's self-care practices may help her continue, but they do not change the conditions that keep producing pain.

Moto carries the subtheme across time, naming what accumulation looks like when the weight of the work becomes breakdown.

At a personal level, that is what's happened to me. My body has broken down. My health has absolutely been impacted. And this is the arc of the work, it didn't start in 2024. There's a shift that takes place. I spend more time in nature, I meditate, I stay in community. But those things won't restore what has been lost, not my health, and not the relationships that have been strained by this work. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's account holds effort and loss together. He names the practices he uses to sustain himself, including nature, meditation, and community, while also naming what those practices cannot restore. His exhaustion is cumulative, measured in health, relationship, and years of carrying work that steadily extracted more than it returned. The significance of his account lies in the

permanence of the loss. Rest and restoration practices may help him keep moving, but they cannot fully repair what the work has already taken.

Other participants gave this subtheme additional texture through smaller but equally revealing details. Hewa described being “burned out like everybody else” while spending her remaining energy reassuring staff, absorbing their anxiety without comparable infrastructure to absorb her own. Mwerevu described exhaustion crossing from institutional life into home life, saying the work was “bogging me down” and that he was “tired of coming home and being frustrated.” Huruma added the compound pressure of leading an office of one while also navigating family crises, including racism directed at her son and her father’s illness. In these accounts, exhaustion does not remain contained within the workday. It follows participants home, enters family life, and displaces the ordinary conditions of recovery.

The convergence across these accounts lies in the shared texture of the drag. Participants continued moving, but the movement cost more than ordinary professional fatigue can explain. Ardhi and Moto show exhaustion embedded across a long temporal arc, measured in health, joy, and professional energy that had once been connected to expansion. Roho and Maji show exhaustion as anticipatory and cognitive, with the mind working ahead of events to manage threat before it arrives. Ulinzi and Hewa show exhaustion moving through caretaking and bodily pain, as each absorbed strain generated by institutions with too little infrastructure for the anxieties they produced. Mwerevu, Busara, and Huruma show exhaustion crossing the boundary between professional and personal life, following the leader home and compounding alongside family and relational strain. Subira stands as an analytic outlier because his exhaustion appears most clearly through composure itself, with measured language holding the weight of a week that included a physical threat and hundreds of threatening emails.

Across Subtheme 2a, exhaustion emerges as an embodied index of structural constraint. Participants' bodies and minds registered the weight of risk, vigilance, and institutional contradiction. Weick's concept of extracted cues helps clarify how participants read depletion as environmental data, interpreting somatic and cognitive signals as information about what the institution was requiring of them (Weick, 1995). Hartley et al.'s competency of reading people and situations helps explain why vigilance intensified under scrutiny, as participants stayed alert to how their words, decisions, and presence might be read (Hartley et al., 2015). Ray's mechanism that organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, read alongside the CRT tenet of endemic racism, clarifies why the strain was distributed unevenly, as institutions rationed resources, demanded proof, and concentrated the weight of risk in the bodies and relational lives of equity leaders (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ray, 2019).

Moving through molasses names that concentration as it captures forward motion under conditions that make every step slower, heavier, and more costly. The exhaustion participants carried was especially corrosive because it was tied to a growing recognition that the institutions they were working to protect were withdrawing protection from them, their teams, and the communities most affected by the hostile climate. That recognition moved the burden from physical and emotional depletion into the moral interior of the work itself. The next subtheme examines that moral injury through participants' experiences of internal betrayal, leadership silence, and institutional retreat.

Internal Treason and the Sting of Betrayal

This subtheme takes its title from the language participants used to describe betrayal from within their institutions, with Moto calling the behavior he witnessed "internal treason," naming the experience of leaders who proclaimed commitment in public while retreating from that

commitment in practice, and Roho using the word "traitorous" to describe what the role required of her when institutional confidentiality forced her to withhold information from the very staff she felt responsible for protecting. The word sting captures the affective quality that moved across these accounts, since betrayal landed as an immediate wound, and participants often felt it before they could fully name it as an institutional pattern.

Across participants, betrayal took several forms. For Moto, it appeared through public performance and private dismantling. For Roho, it appeared through forced secrecy that violated her relational ethic of leadership. For Subira, it appeared through estrangement from junior faculty of color, the very constituency he most hoped to serve, especially when he carried more information than he could publicly share about institutional decisions. For Maji, betrayal appeared through exclusion from governance after she was told there was "no role" for her in a cabinet meeting where equity belonged. For Busara, it appeared through accusation, when colleagues filed a complaint claiming she had "forced them to hire a certain person" because of race. Across these accounts, betrayal became a form of moral injury because participants were asked to uphold institutional values publicly while watching those values become narrowed, delayed, inverted, or turned against them.

As an active CDO, I brought to these accounts a familiarity with the point where strategy can begin to feel morally compromised. Participants were making sense of silence mandates, reversals, accusations, and forced secrecy as evidence that their institutions were pulling back from the values, they still expected DEI leaders to represent, and the injury came from being asked to sustain the public face of institutional commitment while privately absorbing the consequences of institutional retreat.

Moto names this injury with unusual force.

It felt like internal treason. The way people were talking about diverse populations, the way they were, in my opinion, being cowards. Refusing to put up flyers about people's rights because it might land them on some Elon watch list, because they might get named in a tweet for trying to move the needle forward. I was stunned. A lot of the work became very covert. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's use of "internal treason" refuses the softer language of caution, prudence, or risk management, and he names institutional silence as an ethical violation, especially when human dignity and basic information about people's rights became subordinate to institutional self-protection. His use of "covert" also matters because it shows how far the retreat had traveled, since equity work had to move underground inside the very institution that claimed to value it. Interest convergence clarifies the structural logic of Moto's account because institutional alignment with equity held only as long as that alignment remained compatible with organizational political, financial, and reputational interests (Bell, 1992), and once leaders perceived those interests to be at risk, support receded, leaving Moto to manage the human consequences of a withdrawal the institution would barely name.

Roho brings betrayal into the daily intimacy of leadership, locating the deepest injury in the relational ethic that had organized her understanding of the role.

What makes me feel stifled is feeling like I cannot be authentic with my staff, that I have to hold things back from them. I use the word traitorous. I want to operate transparently and freely, but there are certain things my role requires me to keep confidential. One of my staff members said to me today, are we going to be laid off? (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho's use of "traitorous" shows where the institutional requirement has taken her, since the harm settles in the gap between the kind of leader she wants to be and the kind of leader the institution is requiring her to become, and her staff member's question about layoffs intensifies that injury because it places her directly inside the relational consequence of institutional secrecy. She knows more than she can say, and the silence she must maintain feels like a violation of the trust she wants to practice. Hartley et al.'s domain of personal skills helps illuminate the

complexity of this moment because confidentiality may appear from the outside as necessary judgment in a high-stakes environment, while Roho's account shows what that judgment costs from the inside (Hartley et al., 2015), and the requirement to regulate emotion and manage information corrodes the relational openness through which she understands her leadership, foreshadowing the deeper identity strain Ardhi names later in the subtheme. Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice also clarifies the organizational pattern, since the institution's public commitments to care and equity separate from everyday practices that leave the equity leader carrying the moral fallout of decisions made elsewhere (Ray, 2019).

Mwerevu names another face of betrayal, rooted in leadership's refusal of honest partnership and in the loss of trust that follows repeated inconsistency.

Right now, leadership is basically nobody's ally, and they do not seem to recognize that. They do not recognize that people do not trust them, and they do not recognize how their behavior is affecting the workforce. I have to frame it as a lack of recognition, because the alternative would be that they do see it and simply do not care, and that feels deeply hurtful and disrespectful. (Mwerevu, Interview 2)

Mwerevu describes betrayal as the collapse of institutional credibility, since he is reading leadership behavior as something that teaches people to stop believing what they hear, and his phrase "nobody's ally" carries the weight of that reading because it points to a failure of relationship as well as a failure of support. The injury deepens when he considers the possibility that leaders may recognize the harm and still choose inaction, and that possibility is what he calls "deeply hurtful and disrespectful." Weick's property of plausibility over accuracy helps clarify the labor in this account because Mwerevu is constructing the most bearable interpretation of leadership behavior while still naming its effects (Weick, 1995), and he chooses "lack of recognition" because the alternative would require him to conclude that leaders see the harm and

accept it. Hartley et al.'s competency of reading people and situations also names what Mwerevu is doing, since he is producing a diagnostic account of leadership credibility that draws on accumulated observation of behavior, timing, and silence (Hartley et al., 2015). This is betrayal as interpretive strain, where the participant must make meaning from institutional behavior that keeps undermining trust.

Ardhi carries the subtheme further inward by naming the point where institutional betrayal becomes a crisis of moral self-relationship.

I try to rally myself and others around that, but at the same time part of me keeps wondering whether I am capitulating to the worst forms of respectability and authoritarianism, and whether that makes me complicit in what we all know is an erosion of civil rights and human rights. (Ardhi, Interview 2)

Ardhi's account shows that the sting of betrayal continues in what participants begin to fear the institution is making of them, and her question about capitulation and complicity reveals the injury turning inward, as adaptation begins to feel perilously close to surrender. The force of her account lies in the fact that she continues to lead while refusing to release the moral question, since she is still moving the work forward, yet she is also asking what the terms of that movement are costing. Weick's account of identity construction clarifies this pattern, since sensemaking is rooted in the ongoing question of who one is becoming through one's work (Weick, 1995). Ardhi is not only interpreting institutional signals; she is constructing and contesting her own identity as a leader under conditions where adaptation risks becoming indistinguishable from complicity, and the public labor of adjustment and the private burden of asking what that adjustment is making of her are two faces of a single sensemaking process, one in which institutional pressure shapes not only what she does but who she takes herself to be.

Ulinzi's account offers an important contrast within this subtheme because leadership stepped in to protect her at a moment of heightened exposure.

I made the decision to ask a coworker to take on all of that. Leadership was actually supportive without me having to say much. One of our vice presidents told me, 'you are not going to be in any of those spaces. You need to protect yourself and your family first, and you should step back from all of that.' So, there was support. At no point did leadership push me beyond what felt safe, and I think my president was actually grateful that I knew where my limits were. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi's experience clarifies what other participants meant when they named betrayal, since they were describing moments when protection was possible and those in authority allowed them to remain exposed, silenced, or morally burdened. Ulinzi's case diverges because leaders assumed some responsibility for her safety rather than requiring her to carry the full risk alone, and the hostile climate remained present, especially given the vulnerability attached to her Arab immigrant identity, yet leadership's response changed the meaning of the experience. It showed that institutional protection can interrupt the pattern of betrayal when leaders choose to absorb some of the risk themselves.

Moto's second account returns to the more common pattern and shows how betrayal also accumulates through instability over time.

I had to be very strategic. Have separate conversations with the president first, then bring things into the senior management team. Because unless the president declared it in front of everyone, it would get shut down by general counsel or communications. It became a dizzying dynamic. One week, we support you, we're behind you, we need to support our immigrants. The next week, hold on, we can't do that. Let's wait. (Moto, Interview 2)

The phrase "dizzying dynamic" captures an institution generating motion without stability, since support appears and disappears before Moto can establish a reliable reading of what is possible, and he has to sequence conversations carefully, secure presidential declaration before broader discussion, and anticipate the places where general counsel or communications may shut the work down. This is betrayal as organizational volatility, since the institution keeps asking him to act strategically while changing the terms of support from week to week. Ray's mechanism describing the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources along racialized lines

helps clarify the structural pattern, since the institution preserves equity language at the level of statement while concentrating the strategic labor of sequencing, anticipation, and risk management on the equity leader without acknowledging that labor as work it has assigned (Ray, 2019). Hartley et al.'s competency of strategic direction and scanning names the leadership labor Moto is performing under those conditions, since he is calibrating timing, messaging, and sequence in an environment where the rules keep shifting (Hartley et al., 2015), and Weick's property of the ongoing process clarifies the interpretive cost, since Moto is engaged in continuous recalibration without arrival (Weick, 1995).

Moto's final reflection brings the relational and symbolic dimensions of betrayal into sharper view.

Presidential leadership is absolutely critical in those moments, the willingness to be bold, to be candid, to have a soul. At my institution, people are operating out of fear. And our president, in ways I never anticipated, suddenly wasn't willing to speak out or say anything. (Moto, Interview 2)

The wound here lies in Moto's reappraisal of a relationship he thought he understood, since presidential silence becomes a failure of courage, recognition, and solidarity at once, and he is rereading the relationship backward, making sense of prior trust through the evidence of what the president would not do when the moment required public support. Weick's property of retrospective sensemaking clarifies what is happening in this reappraisal, since meaning is being constructed by looking backward at accumulated experience and reorganizing it through the cue of present silence (Weick, 1995). This retrospective work matters because betrayal often becomes clear after the fact, when participants look back and realize that what they understood as shared moral ground was more conditional than it had appeared. Because this reading is retrospective, however, it also reorganizes a more mixed institutional history into a single arc of betrayal; the same sensemaking that makes Moto's account so morally clear may also smooth the

ambivalence his earlier narration recorded, in which support and retreat alternated week to week (Weick, 1995).

Across this subtheme, internal treason names a specific form of institutional failure that produces moral injury rather than ordinary professional disappointment. Participants experienced betrayal when public commitments were separated from private action, when confidentiality required them to violate their relational ethics, when leaders became unreliable, when adaptation began to feel like complicity, and when institutional support appeared and disappeared without a stable logic, and the sting came from being required to protect the institution's values in public while privately absorbing the costs of the institution's retreat.

This betrayal also prepares the movement into the next subtheme, since participants experienced institutional retreat through identities that were already being read, judged, and exposed, and the same conditions that constrained speech and redistributed moral burden also made participants more aware of how race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and other marked identities shaped who was treated as credible, who was left vulnerable, and who became most visible when institutional courage receded. The next subtheme examines how identity itself became a site through which anti-DEI hostility was concentrated and lived.

Our Identities as the Bullseye

The phrase the bullseye emerged through the convergence of accounts in which participants described identity as the place where scrutiny gathered, where institutional fear concentrated, and where harm arrived with unusual precision. Participants were describing more than demographic background, since they were describing the experience of moving through institutions where race, gender, sexuality, nationality, accent, family position, and embodiment

shaped who was heard as credible, who was treated as threatening, who was asked to prove legitimacy, and who was left exposed when institutional protection receded.

Two patterns organize this subtheme. In the first pattern, represented most clearly by Hewa, Maji, Busara, Subira, and Moto, participants encountered the bullseye through credibility taxation, misrecognition, stereotype, accent-based diminishment, and the racialized filtering of authority (Ray, 2019), since their identities shaped whether they were read as executive, trustworthy, neutral, threatening, or competent before any specific action was evaluated on its own terms. In the second pattern, represented most sharply by Ulinzi and differently by Huruma, participants encountered the bullseye through vulnerability, family exposure, bodily fear, and the uneven distribution of institutional protection. The CRT tenet of intersectionality clarifies why identity functions as a convergence rather than a single axis, while Ray's mechanism describing hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential clarifies why credibility itself becomes one of the sites where that convergence is policed (Crenshaw, 1989; Ray, 2019).

Ulinzi names the bullseye as vulnerability that extends beyond the workplace and into the safety of her life and family.

That feels especially challenging given my personal situation. I am not a citizen, and I do not really know peers at other institutions who are in the same position. I am also Arab, which had already felt frightening in recent years, even before the new administration. That has made me feel incredibly vulnerable. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi's language places the threat at the intersection of nationality, race, migration status, and role visibility, and when she says she is "not a citizen," "Arab," and "incredibly vulnerable," she identifies the precise conditions through which the hostile climate becomes personal rather than abstract. Her account shows how leadership and vulnerability can travel together, since the institution expects her to hold public tensions while the broader political environment renders her and her family newly exposed. Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies why this convergence

cannot be reduced to any one axis, since the threat she describes is produced through the simultaneous operation of nationality, race, migration status, and role visibility (Crenshaw, 1989). The CRT tenet of endemic, structural racism helps clarify why that fear is structural rather than situational, since the vulnerability she describes is produced through a racial order the institution inhabits rather than interrupts (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Where Ulinzi names the bullseye as bodily and familial vulnerability, Hewa names it as authority filtered through racialized and gendered leadership norms.

I think being Asian American and being a woman means I experience both racism and sexism, and the combination of the two. I am not often seen as a leader. People read me as too quiet, and I have been told that I do not have executive presence because I do not project a kind of white alpha-male style. But I am not going to force myself to speak more, take up the center, or perform leadership in ways that do not feel authentic to me. I want to lead on my own terms. I also feel there are often higher expectations placed on me because of the model minority myth, as if Asians are good worker bees who should keep doing more work but are not necessarily seen as strong leaders. (Hewa, Interview 1)

Hewa's account shows the bullseye operating through a double demand in which labor is welcomed while authority remains under suspicion, and the phrase "executive presence" carries the full script of the institutional judgment she is describing, since it places leadership legitimacy inside a white masculine performance standard and treats that standard as neutral. Her refusal to "force" herself into that script matters because she reads the institutional expectation clearly while still insisting on a leadership identity that feels authentic to her. Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies the analytic significance of her own framing, since she names the combined operation of racism and sexism as producing a distinct experience that neither axis alone would capture (Crenshaw, 1989). Weick's concept of identity construction helps illuminate the move she makes inside that combined condition, as Hewa interprets who the institution expects her to be while also holding onto who she understands herself to be as a leader (Weick, 1995). Ray's mechanism describing hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential further

clarifies why her labor can be used while her authority remains questioned, since the unmarked white masculine standard of executive presence operates as the credential against which her leadership is measured (Ray, 2019).

Maji carries the subtheme into the terrain of continual racial reading, where the bullseye takes shape through misidentification that never fully settles.

First and foremost, being biracial has shaped how I move through this work. I present as Latina, so people assume I am Latina and speak to me in Spanish all the time. No one ever assumes I am white. People rarely assume I am Black, but when I look in the mirror, I see a Black woman. That is not how the world usually reads me or interacts with me. At the same time, because of how I speak, if someone hears me before they see me, they often assume I am white. I have always had to navigate being misidentified.
(Maji, Interview 2)

Maji's repetition of "assume" and her closing phrase, "I have always had to navigate being misidentified," show the bullseye operating through unstable racial legibility rather than through one fixed stereotype, since she is describing a social world that hears one identity, sees another, and rarely meets the self she names when she says, "when I look in the mirror, I see a Black woman." The leadership role is layered onto a longer history of being read incorrectly, which means the burden of leadership includes the ongoing labor of moving through other people's incomplete interpretations of who she is. Intersectionality clarifies the analytic significance of her account because racial ambiguity, gendered reading, speech, and executive role converge to shape how she is recognized and how she must lead through misrecognition (Crenshaw, 1989).

Busara extends this pattern into language itself, where accent becomes one of the cues through which institutional actors decide who sounds authoritative, who sounds out of place, and who can be diminished without consequence.

One of the things I often talk about is my accent. I have an accent because I was not born here, and that also means I speak two languages. I recently had an experience with someone in my social circle, and I looked at her and said, usually when someone says that to me, I respond by saying I speak two languages, how many do you speak? But in

your case, you speak a second language too, so can you explain what you meant by that comment? (Busara, Interview 2)

Busara places the bullseye in the voice, since accent becomes a cue through which migration history, cultural difference, and institutional value are compressed into a single interaction. Her phrase "I have an accent because I was not born here" grounds the experience in biography rather than deficiency, while her immediate turn to "I speak two languages" refuses the logic that would recast multilingualism as lack. Counter-storytelling helps clarify the force of her response because she produces a competing account of value in which the feature being treated as deficit becomes evidence of knowledge, complexity, and authority (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and her response does more than defend herself, since it reverses the direction of scrutiny and asks the other person to account for the assumption underneath the comment.

Subira's account pushes the subtheme into a more unstable form of exposure, since the bullseye in his case moves between racial erasure and conditional palatability.

Being Asian American has absolutely shaped my leadership. I am very conscious of being a person of color, but not Black. I am conscious of being Chinese American, of the longer history of East Asians in the United States compared with some other groups, and of the fact that I am not white even though some people perceive me that way. It is remarkable that this still happens, but it happened as recently as last month. I can be in a room full of white people and someone will say something like, "We are all white here, so we can all see this from this perspective." That is not even a microaggression; it is overt. (Subira, Interview 1)

One colleague's analysis was that I was able to make things happen that the previous three leaders could not because of my identity. Her view was that a Black man could not ask for the same things an Asian American man could. I do not know if she is right, but that was her opinion. She would say repeatedly that some people see Black colleagues, especially Black colleagues in leadership, as more threatening, while Asian American colleagues are seen as less threatening. (Subira, Interview 2)

Subira's account moves between two expressions of the same racialized organizational logic. In one room, he is erased by a colleague who says "we are all white here" while he is physically present, and in another, he is asked to consider whether his racial position grants him access that

would remain closed to a Black colleague in the same role. His phrase "I do not know if she is right" shows careful sensemaking rather than overclaiming, since he draws meaning from accumulated experience while leaving room for uncertainty. Ray's mechanism describing hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential clarifies the pattern, since proximity to whiteness functions as the credential through which institutional comfort, threat assessment, and racial palatability are calibrated, and the formal role of CDO reads differently across bodies depending on how that credential is read in a given room (Ray, 2019). In Subira's account, the bullseye changes form rather than disappearing, since it becomes the unstable position of being erased in one moment, conditionally authorized in another, and left to interpret what that racial sorting means for the work.

Moto sharpens the stereotype and legitimacy pattern by naming what anti-Blackness does to competence before he even enters the room.

As a Black man, I know people are going to question my competence. They are going to assume that my academic achievement came from affirmative action or from being given things I did not earn. Even in academic spaces, I am often viewed as deviant, defiant, and dysfunctional, and I have experienced that very directly. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's use of "question my competence," "did not earn," and "deviant, defiant, and dysfunctional" shows the bullseye as anticipatory suspicion, since Black male leadership is positioned inside institutional stereotype before any specific action can be evaluated on its own terms, and he is describing an environment where authority begins from doubt and must work backward toward legitimacy. The CRT tenet of endemic, structural racism clarifies why this expectation is rational rather than exaggerated, since the stereotypes Moto names have institutional durability and continue to organize how Black competence is received even in spaces that publicly claim equity commitments (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The bullseye in

his account gathers around Blackness, masculinity, and leadership together, with each intensifying the scrutiny he knows will be waiting before he speaks.

Huruma's account expands the subtheme by showing that the bullseye did not gather around participants in identical form, since her positionality as a white queer woman and mother of a multiracial child places her differently in relation to danger, privilege, and responsibility.

I had many conversations with a colleague of mine, about what it means to be a white person in DEI work. I felt, and still feel, that I have to prove myself, though not in a negative or defensive way. I have to build trust because so many people of color I know have been harmed by white people and white systems. I think about that constantly. That intersects with my role as a white mother of a multiracial child of color. My son calls himself mixed, and his birth father is Somali-Kenyan. I think about that all the time. I could never do enough, not from a martyr mindset, but because there is so much to be done and it feels especially important that I do this work given the privilege I have as a white person. (Huruma, Interview 2)

Huruma's account shows the bullseye taking the form of responsibility shaped by trust, family exposure, and sustained awareness of privilege, and her repeated phrases, "I have to build trust," "I think about that constantly," and "given the privilege I have as a white person," ground the account in a form of pressure that differs from direct de-legitimization while still showing how identity structures the work. Intersectionality is useful here because Huruma is moving through the institution as white, queer, gendered, and maternally tied to a multiracial child, and those positions produce a configuration of burden that cannot be reduced to either privilege or vulnerability alone (Crenshaw, 1989). Her account shows that identity shapes what trust requires of her, what responsibility feels like, and what fears she carries into the institution each day.

Across this subtheme, the bullseye names the uneven way exposure gathered around particular bodies, voices, histories, and family ties inside institutions that continued to speak the language of equity while reading participants through older hierarchies of credibility and threat. Ulinzi experienced the bullseye as vulnerability tied to nationality, Arab identity, and family

safety. Hewa experienced it as racialized and gendered misrecognition of leadership. Maji experienced it as continual misidentification. Busara experienced it through accent-based diminishment and multilingual self-assertion. Subira experienced it as movement between erasure and conditional palatability. Moto experienced it as anticipatory suspicion attached to Black male leadership. Huruma experienced it as a different burden structured through whiteness, queerness, and maternal responsibility.

These differences matter because identity did not sit behind anti-DEI hostility as background context, since identity was one of the ways institutions distributed legitimacy, vulnerability, credibility, and room to maneuver. Ray's mechanism describing how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups clarifies this cross-case pattern, since participants were describing an institutional order that allocated authority, safety, and credibility unevenly through identity while maintaining a formal commitment to inclusion (Ray, 2019). This pattern answers the research question directly because participants' experiences of anti-DEI hostility were inseparable from who they were, and their responses to that hostility were shaped by the identities through which the institution had already decided how much safety, credibility, and freedom of movement each participant would receive.

These accounts prepare the movement into the Theme Two cross-case analysis because the harm traced across this theme cannot be separated into clean categories of stress, betrayal, and identity-based exposure. Exhaustion became heavier because participants were carrying contradictions they could not resolve, betrayal cut deeper because it landed on identities already marked for scrutiny, and identity became harder to bear because institutions responded to hostility by redistributing risk downward rather than absorbing it themselves. The cross-case analysis gathers these movements into a single analytic frame, showing how participants

described embodied racial harm as something that reached into the body, the conscience, and the conditions under which each person could move, speak, and remain in the work.

Cross-Case Analysis of Theme Two: Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal

Across Theme Two, participants described anti-DEI hostility as harm that moved from institutional climate into embodied life, and the exhaustion, betrayal, and identity-based exposure traced across the three subthemes appeared differently across participants, yet the cross-case pattern held with striking consistency. Institutions redistributed risk downward onto CDOs, required them to metabolize the consequences, and left them carrying costs that settled in their bodies, relationships, families, and moral lives over time. What varied across cases was where that harm landed most heavily, how long it had been accumulating, and how each participant interpreted it from their position inside a racialized institution.

The three subthemes show how embodied racial harm accumulated across different but interconnected registers. Subtheme 2a showed harm as depletion, with participants describing exhaustion that exceeded ordinary professional fatigue and registered as heaviness, dread, cognitive looping, bodily pain, and breakdown over time. Subtheme 2b showed harm as moral injury, with participants describing betrayal that emerged when institutions asked them to uphold equity publicly while watching those same commitments narrow, invert, or disappear in practice. Subtheme 2c showed harm as identity-based exposure, with participants describing how race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, accent, family role, and embodiment shaped who was doubted, scrutinized, protected, or left vulnerable. Together, these subthemes show that participants were carrying anti-DEI hostility across the body, conscience, and identity at the same time.

The most consistent cross-case pattern was that participants understood their exhaustion as structurally produced. Maji named the toll as deeper than she had expected, even after years of equity leadership. Ardhi distinguished between the volume of work and the weight of work, describing a role that had become heavier, more political, and more emotionally costly. Roho described cognitive looping and anticipatory dread, while Busara described conserving energy and choosing carefully when to respond. Moto and Ardhi read exhaustion across a longer arc, naming damage that had accumulated over years and altered their sense of what the work had taken from them. Ulinzi and Hewa showed how depletion moved through bodily pain and caretaking labor, while Mwerevu, Huruma, and Busara showed how exhaustion crossed the boundary between professional and personal life. Subira stood apart in the restraint of his language, with composure itself carrying the weight of a week that included a physical threat and hundreds of threatening emails.

This convergence matters because participants were describing fatigue as information, given that their bodies and minds were registering what the institution was requiring of them. Weick's property of extracted cues helps clarify this pattern because participants were reading dread, heaviness, looping thoughts, and bodily pain as signals about the environment they were navigating (Weick, 1995). The CRT tenet of endemic, structural racism clarifies why the cross-case pattern of harm-transfer was systemic rather than situational, as the institutional habit of redistributing risk downward onto equity leaders is consistent with the structural durability the tenet names (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ray's mechanism describing how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups further clarifies why this depletion pointed toward a structural source, in that institutions concentrated risk, scarcity, and scrutiny in the

bodies and relational lives of equity leaders (Ray, 2019). The exhaustion described across cases was therefore an embodied index of institutional contradiction.

The second cross-case pattern was betrayal. Participants described a repeated experience of being asked to represent institutional equity values while watching those values become contingent, fragile, or quietly abandoned. Moto named this as internal treason when leadership proclaimed commitment in public while retreating in practice. Roho named it as traitorous when confidentiality requirements forced her to withhold information from staff, she felt responsible for protecting. Mwerevu described betrayal as a collapse of trust in leaders who seemed unable or unwilling to recognize the harm their behavior caused. Maji experienced betrayal through exclusion from governance spaces where equity belonged. Busara experienced it through accusation, when the language of equity was turned against her. Huruma's account showed how institutional inaction in the face of documented harm shaped her understanding of what organizations would protect and what they would leave intact.

Interest convergence helps explain why betrayal appeared so consistently across these accounts, because institutional commitment to equity held most firmly when it aligned with organizational comfort, resource protection, political safety, or reputational interest, and that commitment became fragile when equity required the institution to absorb risk (Bell, 1992). Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice also clarifies the pattern because participants described institutions that preserved formal equity language while everyday practices determined who was included, accused, protected, dismissed, or left to absorb harm (Ray, 2019). The betrayal also reshaped how participants understood themselves as leaders, with Weick's account of identity construction clarifying why the injury settled so deeply, since participants were not only interpreting institutional behavior

but also asking what that behavior was making of them and what kind of leader they could remain inside it (Weick, 1995). The sting of betrayal came from having to remain professionally functional inside that gap.

The third cross-case pattern was identity-based exposure. Participants described identity as one of the primary ways institutions distributed credibility, vulnerability, and protection. Hewa experienced the bullseye through racialized and gendered expectations about executive presence. Maji experienced it through continual misidentification and the labor of leading while being read through incomplete assumptions about who she was. Busara experienced it through accent-based diminishment and the need to answer deficit assumptions with her own account of multilingual authority. Subira experienced it through racial erasure in some spaces and conditional palatability in others. Moto experienced it through anti-Black suspicion attached to competence before he ever spoke. Ulinzi experienced it through vulnerability tied to Arab identity, immigration status, family safety, and public role visibility. Huruma experienced it through a different configuration of whiteness, queerness, maternal responsibility, and family exposure.

Intersectionality clarifies why the bullseye took different forms across cases, given that race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, accent, family composition, and institutional position converged rather than operating separately (Crenshaw, 1989). Ray's mechanism describing how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups names how institutions distributed authority, safety, credibility, and room to maneuver through identity while continuing to claim formal commitments to inclusion (Ray, 2019). Across cases, identity shaped how anti-DEI hostility was experienced and how participants judged what was safe, possible, or costly in response.

The cross-case variation across Theme Two is also important because participants did different kinds of meaning-making from within the same broad condition. Some interpreted harm through a long arc of accumulation, as seen in Moto's language of bodily breakdown and Ardhi's contrast between the joy of earlier work and the heaviness of the current moment. Others interpreted harm while still actively metabolizing it, as seen in Roho's loops of thought, Busara's energy conservation, and Ulinzi's continued pain despite extensive self-care. Some experienced betrayal as leadership rupture, while others experienced it as forced secrecy, exclusion, accusation, or moral self-questioning. Some experienced identity exposure as credibility taxation, while others experienced it as family vulnerability or bodily fear. These differences show that embodied racial harm was shared in structure but idiographic in texture.

Theme Two therefore shows that anti-DEI hostility became embodied racial harm when institutions transferred contradiction, risk, and moral burden onto the people charged with sustaining equity work. Participants carried the work in their bodies through exhaustion, in their consciences through betrayal, and in their identities through uneven exposure to scrutiny and danger. The convergence answers the research question directly because participants were experiencing anti-DEI hostility as more than a political or organizational challenge, in that they were living it as a condition that shaped how they moved, spoke, rested, parented, trusted, protected themselves, and remained in the work.

This cross-case analysis also prepares the movement into Theme Three. Theme Two shows what the work cost, while Theme Three shows how participants acted from within that cost, because the same conditions that produced exhaustion, betrayal, and identity-based exposure also required participants to build coalitions, use data, protect relationships, and embed equity into institutional structures wherever they could. Their strategies were therefore shaped by

embodied knowledge of institutional risk, and the next theme traces how that knowledge became resistant political praxis.

Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness

Theme Three shows how participants responded once anti-DEI hostility had become unmistakable inside their institutions, since the same conditions that produced exhaustion, betrayal, and identity-based exposure also forced participants to determine how equity work could continue moving. Across accounts, strategy emerged as obligatory, since participants understood that equity work would rarely survive on moral clarity alone, and that institutions rarely changed because the right argument had finally been made. What emerged instead was a form of resistant political praxis in which participants read their environments carefully, identified where influence still lived, and built pathways for equity work to move through structures that remained ambivalent, constrained, or actively resistant.

The language of this theme came directly from participants' accounts of how they acted under pressure. Maji articulated the long horizon most clearly when she imagined a future in which the CDO office might disappear while a system-wide diversity effort continued because the work had become woven across the institution. Roho named the survival orientation underneath that practice, describing her approach as one in which keeping the work present and intact was itself resistance. Several participants described preservation as a form of resistance, but this theme should examine that claim rather than accept it at face value. As the cross-case analysis shows, the same interest-convergence logic that limits equity work can also make a quieter and less visible version of the work more acceptable to the institution. Subira named the institutional conditions that made this praxis necessary, describing an office with the smallest budget and the thinnest formal authority on campus while still insisting that influence remained

possible from that position. Mwerevu named the threshold where the work would lose integrity altogether, refusing activity that amounted to symbolic rearrangement on a structure he understood as already failing. Together, these accounts show that resistant political praxis was more than a set of techniques, since it was a posture forged inside racialized institutions that made equity labor necessary, contested, and persistently precarious.

Three linked moves organize this theme. Participants first built coalitions because equity work could travel only as far as the relationships carrying it could reach. They then assembled arguments that paired evidence with moral and institutional consequence, making equity claims harder to dismiss by speaking to organizational logics and to the human costs those logics often concealed. Finally, they pursued structural embeddedness, trying to place equity into policies, governance routines, review processes, strategic plans, and accountability systems durable enough to survive personnel shifts and political retreat. Across these moves, the shared pattern was agency exercised under constraint, and participants widened possibility while remaining clear about the institution's limits.

Hartley et al.'s domains of reading people and situations, building alignment and alliances, and strategic direction clarify the practice taking shape here, since participants were assessing power, constructing support, and maintaining long-range direction under conditions of political pressure (Hartley et al., 2015). Weick's account of ongoing sensemaking also helps explain why these practices remained interpretive, iterative, and dependent on reading the environment closely (Weick, 1995). Ray's theory of racialized organizations clarifies why the work had to be built this way at all, since participants were acting inside structures that distributed legitimacy, authority, and receptivity unevenly before any strategy was deployed (Ray, 2019).

What became clear across participants' accounts was that this praxis began earlier and more relationally than any dashboard, policy revision, or governance structure could capture. Before participants could make an argument land, build accountability, or embed equity into routine institutional life, they had to determine who could be trusted, who understood the stakes, who had influence, and who would help carry the work when formal authority narrowed. Coalition-building therefore functioned as the first condition of possibility for everything that followed, since without it, equity leadership risked becoming isolated performance rather than durable institutional movement.

Our Co-Conspirators and Lifelines: Building Bridges, Not Burning Them

The language of this subtheme came directly from the way participants named the relationships that made movement possible when formal authority narrowed. Participants did not describe coalition-building as a general leadership preference, since they described it as survival infrastructure, strategic reach, and a way to keep equity work moving when the institution itself became hesitant, fragmented, or unreliable. Co-conspirators were the people who moved with them when the institution would not, and lifelines were the relationships and networks that helped them stay oriented, protected, and connected when the work became isolating or politically dangerous. Building bridges, not burning them captured the discipline of sustaining relationships across difference, frustration, and institutional ambivalence so that the work could still travel farther than the CDO's formal authority allowed.

Two patterns organize the subtheme. One pattern, represented most clearly by Ardhi, Roho, Huruma, and Mwerevu, built power through credibility, care, trust, and sustained interpersonal investment in contexts where formal authority was limited. These participants built bridges through repeated conversations, careful listening, credibility repair, and the slow work of

making people feel responsible for equity even when the institution had not formally required them to be. A second pattern, represented most clearly by Maji, Subira, Moto, and Ulinzi, built power through architecture, positional mapping, redundancy, and the deliberate assembly of networks able to widen reach or provide protection when ordinary channels narrowed. These participants built lifelines through governance design, identity-based networks, peer CDO communities, and mission-aligned partnerships that could carry the work when one office or one leader could not. The difference between these patterns lies in texture and direction, since some participants built influence through relational warmth and trust, while others built it through structural design and strategic mapping. Hartley et al.'s building alignment and alliances domain helps clarify why both forms mattered, since participants were constructing the conditions under which equity work could move, survive, and acquire force beyond the limits of their formal role (Hartley et al., 2015).

Ardhi named this first layer of resistant praxis directly, describing equity leadership as work that resembled community organizing more than formal administration.

Being a CDO is like running for political office. You have to give a lot of stump speeches. Or maybe it is even more like being a community organizer. That is actually how I see myself. You take the one-on-ones, you take the meetings, you network. You start connecting people and issues that did not previously seem connected. (Ardhi, Interview 1)

Ardhi's movement from "political office" to "community organizer" shows how she understands both the role and the source of power available to it, since the organizer builds bridges through repetition, proximity, and connection rather than through stable positional authority, and that is the orientation Ardhi claims when she says, "that is actually how I see myself." Her sequence of "one-on-ones," "meetings," and "network" shows Weick's property of enactment because she is building movement through action and shaping the institutional terrain by entering it repeatedly

until people and issues that were institutionally separated can be brought into relation (Weick, 1995). In her account, building bridges is not symbolic, since it is the daily practice through which isolated issues become shared institutional responsibility.

Roho gives this relational pattern a more discriminating texture by distinguishing between people who are helpful and people who become true co-conspirators.

There are different levels of allies. Some people are allies in a general sense because they are simply helpful. But then there are others who are willing to take risks with you, willing to move an agenda forward with you and without you. Even when you are not in the room, they are still carrying the work. (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho's distinction between "helpful" allies and people who move the work "with you and without you" clarifies what co-conspirators meant in this study, since a co-conspirator is someone who takes on risk, continues the work in the CDO's absence, and treats equity as shared labor rather than as the isolated responsibility of one office. The phrase "without you" matters because it marks the threshold where relationship becomes distributed power, since Roho is describing the bridge becoming strong enough to hold weight even when she is not standing on it herself. In that sense, co-conspirators are more than supporters, since they are carriers of the work.

Subira widens the subtheme from interpersonal trust into a more layered form of coalition, where identity-based community and institutional relationships become lifelines that provide both reach and durability.

We have an Asian American employee resource group here, and I serve as its liaison and facilitator. What has helped is that I have been here long enough to have built trust. Even after becoming an administrator, people in that group still trusted me. It is a very strong faculty-staff group, with around fifty members. When anti-Asian violence increased in the early days of COVID, members of that group encouraged me to encourage the president to make a statement. Not every president wants to speak publicly about every issue, and that is even more true now, but back then statements were still being made. I remember that president saying, "You are asking me, and you are Asian American, so I will do it." That is how it happened. (Subira, Interview 2)

Subira's account shows how a lifeline can become an institutional channel, since the employee resource group was not activated in a single moment of crisis but had been cultivated across time, strengthened through trust, and positioned closely enough to the president to convert shared concern into institutional speech. The phrases "long enough to have built trust" and "people in that group still trusted me" reveal that the bridge had already been built before the crisis arrived, and when anti-Asian violence intensified, that bridge could carry a request to the president and make public response possible. The line "you are asking me, and you are Asian American, so I will do it" also shows how identity, trust, and institutional access converged in that moment. Hartley et al.'s competency of building alignment and alliances clarifies the strategic value of that long cultivation, since the durability of the relationship was itself the precondition for the institutional speech it eventually produced (Hartley et al., 2015). Subira's lifeline was both relational and positional, giving him a way to move concern from community experience into presidential action.

Moto shows what lifelines become when institutional threat intensifies and ordinary communication channels no longer feel safe.

One thing I needed was much more community, so I began scheduling regular calls with other Chief Diversity Officers. That became a lifeline for me, and it was clear to me that others needed it too. At one point, that even meant setting up a Signal account because some people had real concerns about using Meta platforms. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's use of "much more community," "lifeline," and "Signal account" shows coalition-building under conditions of exposure, since the lifeline in his account is relational, emotional, strategic, and infrastructural at once. It provides community, but it also provides a protected route for sharing information when ordinary channels feel risky. His account extends the subtheme beyond the individual campus and into the professional field, where peer CDO networks became spaces

for intelligence, moral support, and strategic testing once institutional space contracted. Hartley et al.'s reading people and situations domain helps clarify the practice visible here because Moto is continuously assessing where risk sits, which channels remain usable, and how coalition must adapt when visibility itself becomes dangerous (Hartley et al., 2015). In his account, the lifeline helps leaders keep thinking together when the climate is trying to isolate them.

Ulinzi broadens the subtheme again by showing that building bridges requires more than goodwill, since it requires people who are structurally part of the work and public language that places the work inside the institution's mission before opposition can define it otherwise.

Do not do this work alone. If you are offered a CDO role and there is no team, say no. You have to have partners in the work. I do not just mean coalition-builders. I mean people who are structurally part of the work with you. You need a real team that is fully in it with you. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi separates bridges from loose affiliation. First came the public statements. The message was that this is at the core of the community college mission, these are our institutional values, and we are committed to them. Diversity and inclusion are one of those values. That framing is also part of why my title was changed to Mission, Values, and Community Impact. That was the first communication out. Then internally, we changed the language of the department, the title, and the DEI strategic plan. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

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She is clear that the work requires people who are "structurally part of the work," meaning partners who are responsible for carrying it rather than people who only support it when asked. Her second account shows how bridges can also be built through institutional framing,

since by placing equity inside mission, values, and community impact, Ulinzi makes the work harder to isolate as ideology and easier to understand as part of the institution's declared purpose. The sequence of "first came the public statements" and "then internally" shows Weick's property of enactment because she is shaping how the institution interprets the work before opposition can narrow its meaning (Weick, 1995). In her account, building bridges means building both partners and interpretive cover.

Mwerevu, Maji, and Huruma deepen the cross-case pattern through related forms of bridge-building. Mwerevu's insistence that "what has mattered most is trust" and his practice of "circling back" show bridge-building as credibility repair inside an institution where leadership had already damaged trust. Maji's committee structure, with "equity anchors" distributed across other board committees, shows bridge-building through governance architecture rather than one-to-one persuasion alone. Huruma's emphasis on credibility, willingness to work with people, and the need for colleagues to back up what she is advocating for shows co-conspiracy as the condition through which a low-power office acquires enough reach to matter.

Across cases, the convergence is strong enough to name as a structural finding. Participants consistently described coalition as necessary, formal authority as insufficient, and relationship-building as continuous work. The variation lies in the texture and location of the bridges and lifelines each participant built. Ardhi built bridges through organizing, care, and connection. Roho distinguished between ordinary allies and co-conspirators who would carry the work in her absence. Subira built lifelines through identity-based community and presidential access. Moto built lifelines through protected peer networks under threat. Ulinzi built bridges through teams, mission language, and structural partnership. Mwerevu, Maji, and Huruma added further dimensions through trust repair, governance design, and credibility-based influence.

These differences show that coalition-building inside racialized organizations had to adapt to the local shape of power, since participants were not building relationships for their own sake but were building the pathways through which equity could move when formal authority was too thin, too contested, or too politically exposed to carry the work alone. Ray's mechanism describing how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups clarifies why coalition became so central, since participants were working inside institutions where legitimacy and authority were unevenly distributed before any strategy began (Ray, 2019). Co-conspirators and lifelines therefore became part of the infrastructure of resistance, while building bridges, not burning them, became the disciplined relational practice that allowed participants to keep widening the circle around the work.

Coalition-building created the relational infrastructure that made movement possible, but relationships alone could only carry the work so far. Participants also had to make equity claims legible to institutions that often filtered credibility through power, politics, and self-protection. The co-conspirators and lifelines described in Subtheme 3a helped participants find who could carry the work with them, while Subtheme 3b turns to how they made the case once they entered the room, pairing evidence with human consequence so that equity work became harder to dismiss, delay, or ignore.

The Receipts and the Heartbeats: Making Them Listen

The language of this subtheme came from the way participants described the double work of persuasion within institutions where equity claims rarely moved on moral force alone. The receipts name the evidence participants assembled in advance because equity work carried an intensified burden of proof, since participants entered institutional dialogue with data, frameworks, disaggregated findings, and carefully prepared arguments because they knew their

claims could be disputed, delayed, or dismissed. The heartbeats name the relational and human side of the same persuasive practice. Maji articulated this most clearly through the question of what the person across the table cares about, reminding the analysis that persuasion required more than correct evidence, since it required calibration to the concerns, fears, responsibilities, and decision-making habits of the people whose support had to be secured. Together, the receipts and the heartbeats name a practice that joined evidence and relationship, institutional logic and human consequence, proof and translation.

Three patterns organize this subtheme. One pattern, represented most clearly by Hewa, Subira, Busara, and Huruma, made equity legible through data, frameworks, dashboards, mission alignment, and routinized accountability structures that institutions would find harder to ignore once built. A second pattern, represented most clearly by Maji, Ardhi, Ulinzi, and Roho, made equity claims receivable by calibrating evidence to audience, grounding decisions in values, and tying institutional action to the people affected by policy. A third pattern, represented most clearly by Mwerevu and Moto, showed what happened when persuasion repeatedly encountered dismissal, delay, or institutional incapacity to hear, since in those accounts, the receipts were present, the argument was sound, and the expertise was clear, yet the institution continued to stall or refuse. That third pattern matters because it reveals the limit case of the receipts and the heartbeats, since persuasion remained part of the work, while institutional refusal became its own form of evidence.

Busara clarifies the receipts side of the subtheme through the Equity Mindedness Framework, which she used as a recurring discipline for asking who a policy touched and how institutional habits were distributing harm.

The Equity Mindedness Framework centralizes those questions that people often forget about, like, who am I impacting by race and ethnicity? It helps you break it apart and ask

about who is being affected, who is missing, who benefits, and what historical context is sitting underneath the policy or practice you are looking at. (Busara, Interview 2)

Busara's phrases "centralizes those questions" and "break it apart" show that the framework functions as a structured interruption of institutional habit, since institutions often move too quickly past the questions that would reveal how race, ethnicity, gender, class, caregiving status, and other conditions shape what a policy does once it reaches actual people. Her use of "who is missing" and "what historical context is sitting underneath" widens the framework beyond compliance or demographic counting and turns it into a repeated method for forcing the institution to confront the stratification embedded in everyday decisions. Weick's property of extracted cues helps clarify what this framework does in practice because it keeps the interpretive question of who is affected active within the decision itself (Weick, 1995).

Hewa's account shows what receipts can do once they are built, especially when collecting and disaggregating data requires a workaround.

We do have institutional data collected by Institutional Research that is very helpful because it allows us to say, for example, this is our retention data for faculty, staff, and students. At first, there was resistance. People said they did not have the capacity and that this work fell outside their responsibilities. Fine, we did it ourselves, and now that data has become incredibly useful. After the results came out, I presented the disaggregated data to the deans and academic departments, and then we invited them to the council to reflect on the survey findings and their action plans. (Hewa, Interview 2)

Hewa's sequence of "at first, there was resistance," "we did it ourselves," and "then we invited them" shows persuasion as a process of building credibility through workaround, redistribution, and accountability. Her account traces the arc from institutional reluctance to institutional uptake, with the data becoming "incredibly useful" after she and her colleagues refused to let lack of capacity remain a reason for inaction. The receipt in her account is more than the dataset, since it is the combination of evidence and a social process that requires deans and departments to reflect on what the evidence means for their own units. The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling helps

clarify the force of the move because disaggregated data challenges institutional narratives that allow aggregate success to conceal patterned inequity across groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Subira extends the same logic into governance, showing what happens when data becomes institutional infrastructure rather than a report held by one office. He described a physics department that had known for years that something was wrong in its introductory sequence for students of color and still had not acted until Racial Justice Action Planning delivered the evidence in a way the department could no longer bypass. He also described building an accountability dashboard aligned with a National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education framework after his president asked him to translate equity work into the board's governance structure. In his account, receipts became durable when they were transformed into visible governance artifacts that committees could see, own, and answer to. His language of "data therapy" captures the heart of the subtheme because the breakthrough required more than information sitting on a page, since it required information organized, timed, and framed in ways that made passive awareness harder to maintain. Weick's enactment property helps clarify why the form of delivery mattered because Subira was shaping what the institution could perceive and do by changing the conditions under which the data appeared (Weick, 1995).

Huruma sharpens the receipts logic by naming the full persuasive playbook with unusual clarity.

When I act boldly, there has to be both a clear reason and data to support it. I need both reason and data, and the case also has to connect to our mission, vision, and values as an institution. It is not enough to say that something is simply the right thing to do for college students. We also need to show that it is the right thing to do for our current students, future students, current employees, and future employees. (Huruma, Interview 2)

Huruma's pairing of "reason and data" with "mission, vision, and values" shows that the receipt must travel through institutional identity before it can become actionable. Her phrasing draws

multiple constituencies into the case, with current and future students and employees all functioning as terms through which equity can be made organizationally relevant. The persuasion strategy here is neither coldly technocratic nor merely values-based, since it is a disciplined fusion of evidence, rationale, and institutional self-understanding that makes it harder for leadership to dismiss the claim as unsupported or disconnected from the university's own commitments.

Where these accounts show how evidence is built and positioned, Maji names the heartbeat side of persuasion with the clearest language in the theme. Her account begins with attention to audience, motive, and institutional priority. Persuasion inside racialized organizations requires strong evidence and a careful reading of the person, office, or governing body across the table, since it depends on understanding which framing will make the evidence receivable. The heartbeat is the part of the case that connects an issue to someone's actual priorities, fears, or responsibilities rather than leaving it at the level of abstract rightness. Hartley et al.'s reading people and situations domain helps clarify Maji's practice because her method depends on calibrating a message to the decision context while preserving the substance of the claim (Hartley et al., 2015).

Ardhi bridges the receipts and the heartbeats directly by refusing to separate research from relationship.

First, data, collecting it carefully, grounding everything in research, making sure nothing I say is speculative. I need to be able to point to it. But equally important, maybe more so, is having deep relationships and genuinely understanding other people's perspectives. That comes from my conflict training. I work from an interest-based negotiation approach. (Ardhi, Interview 1)

Ardhi's phrase "nothing I say is speculative" names the chronic positional pressure participants carried into this subtheme, because equity leaders often entered institutional conversations

anticipating heavier scrutiny than other voices would receive. Her immediate movement from data to deep relationships shows that persuasion is a combined practice in which proof and perspective must arrive together, and her interest-based negotiation approach makes evidence more likely to travel because it asks what the other person needs to understand, protect, or risk to move. Hartley et al.'s interpersonal skills domain clarifies the relational side of her practice, since active listening, empathy, and persuasive communication are the competencies through which interest-based negotiation operates (Hartley et al., 2015). Ardhi's contribution therefore lies in showing that receipts become stronger when they are shaped by relationship and by an account of how stratification enters institutional practice.

Ulinzi adds another dimension by showing that heartbeats can also be built through values language that helps a community imagine what success should feel like.

I am going to ask people in table conversations to dream about what success looks like and what kind of inclusive community we want to have on campus. Then I have them work backward from there. How do we get there? How do we really put our values into action? How is each of you, through what you are already doing, serving these institutional values? Hopefully that will bring forward stronger language. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi's account reveals a form of persuasion that begins with imagination and then moves backward into action. Her phrases "dream about what success looks like," "inclusive community," and "put our values into action" show that she is trying to move people from abstract commitment into concrete responsibility by making the desired future vivid enough to organize present action. Weick's enactment property clarifies the structural move underneath this practice, since Ulinzi is treating shared imagination as the social site where the institution's future can be constructed and then acted into reality (Weick, 1995). The heartbeat in her account is communal rather than individual because she is building a shared sense of what the institution should become and asking each participant to locate themselves inside that becoming.

Mwerevu and Moto sharpen the subtheme by tracing the point at which repeated dismissal, delay, and misrecognition turn institutional refusal into its own kind of data. Their accounts belong at the outer edge of this subtheme because they show that the receipts and the heartbeats were never guaranteed to work simply because they were well prepared, since they depended on whether the institution was willing to hear.

One strategy I have worked hard to develop is using data to inform our decisions. Over the summer, I created a DEI map based on our Fall 2023 climate survey. I used that data to show what we should do. We have been working on this since May, and it still has not been finalized because they keep finding something they do not like. At one point, they told me the data were invalid and said not to use them. (Mwerevu, Interview 2)

Mwerevu developed a data-informed strategy grounded in campus climate findings and institutional need, yet the plan remained stuck as supervisors challenged the data, questioned its validity, and withheld movement. His account shows that the problem was the institutional environment in which evidence could be delayed by people who lacked subject-matter expertise but still controlled the pace of action. In this case, the receipt existed, but the institution retained the power to dispute its legitimacy.

Moto's account shows an important point of divergence within the shared pattern, since his experience reveals that the receipts and the heartbeats can make equity claims harder to dismiss, but they cannot guarantee institutional willingness to listen.

I proposed a bias response program grounded in best practices, but the response from senior leadership made clear how far apart we were. One leader told me that we were not even in the same chapter. We were not even in the same book. (Moto, Interview 1)

It is all bullshit. This is a corporation, and that is the bottom line. In the end, people operate in ways that serve their own interests. At this point, I see it as a sinking ship, and I do not believe the work I do with this institution is coming back. (Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's movement from proposing a bias response program to naming the institution as a "sinking ship" shows how repeated refusal can become part of the evidence participants use to

interpret their institutions. The proposal was grounded in best practice, the advocacy had been repeated, and the distance between his analysis and senior leadership's understanding remained profound. Over time, that distance reshaped his sense of what persuasion could accomplish. In this account, withdrawal reads less as defeat and more as an accurate interpretation of an institution whose self-protection had become stronger than its willingness to hear, act, or sustain the work.

Across cases, participants described equity persuasion as work that required evidence, translation, and careful attention to audience, role, and institutional context. Hewa and Subira relied on disaggregated data, dashboards, and governance visibility. Busara used the Equity Mindedness Framework to keep the right questions active in policy analysis. Huruma connected evidence to mission, values, and institutional constituency. Maji began with the person across the table and shaped the case around what that person cared about. Ardhi paired rigorous research with interest-based negotiation. Ulinzi used values language to move people from aspiration toward action. Mwerevu and Moto showed the outer edge of the subtheme, where strong evidence, professional expertise, and careful advocacy still met delay, dismissal, or refusal.

Together, these differences show that the receipts and the heartbeats were never one fixed strategy. Participants adjusted their approach based on where they sat in the institution, who they needed to reach, and how much credibility their claims were likely to receive. The work could open conversations, build stronger cases, and sometimes move people toward action, and it could also be absorbed, delayed, or selectively taken up by institutions that continued to affirm equity in language while withholding structural change.

The receipts and the heartbeats helped participants make equity claims harder to dismiss, but persuasion alone could only take the work so far. Even when participants built strong cases,

paired evidence with human consequence, and calibrated their arguments to institutional priorities, they understood that conversations could be delayed, diluted, or reversed if equity remained dependent on individual advocacy. Subtheme 3c turns to the deeper strategic horizon participants described the effort to bake equity into policies, review processes, governance structures, strategic plans, and everyday routines so the work could endure beyond any single meeting, advocate, or political moment.

Baking It In: Making Equity Part of Everything

This subtheme shows that the most durable strategy participants described was structural embeddedness. Participants recognized that programmatic equity work remained too removable, too dependent on individual champions, and too vulnerable to political weather to hold on its own. Baking it in names the attempt to move equity from the category of special initiative into the category of ordinary institutional expectation, since the goal was to make equity harder to disconnect from, defund, rename, or remove because it had become part of the institution's routine work.

Two patterns organize this subtheme. The first pattern, represented most clearly by Subira, Hewa, Maji, and Busara, embedded equity through governance, strategic planning, review cycles, committee design, HR processes, and financial structures. These participants worked through mechanisms the institution already recognized as consequential. The second pattern, represented most clearly by Ardhi, Huruma, and Ulinzi, embedded equity through redundancy, distributed learning, student leadership, belonging-centered design, and relational continuity. These participants built capacity through people, language, and recurring practices that could keep the work alive even when formal structures remained incomplete. The difference between the patterns lies in where participants found leverage and how much authority their

institutions gave them to formalize it. The strategic aspiration remained consistent, since participants were trying to make equity part of how the institution already understood itself and already conducted its work.

Subira named that aspiration with the clearest institutional mechanism in the theme.

We are doing that by baking equity into academic departments' decennial and midterm reviews, so it becomes an integrated and normal part of what those departments do. The president also authorized me to work with the Vice President of Human Resources to create a new kind of equity and inclusion review for non-academic units. (Subira, Interview 2)

Subira's use of "baking equity into" and "integrated and normal" shows that the strategy is working at the level of routine institutional function, since the phrase "normal part of what those departments do" identifies the shift from equity as something periodically requested to equity as something departments are expected to address whenever they are reviewed. The authorization to create a corresponding review for non-academic units widens the same logic across the institution, with equity moving into the recurring evaluative structures that already shape how departments and units justify their work. Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice clarifies why this matters, since participants were trying to close the gap between public equity language and the everyday processes through which institutional priorities are enforced (Ray, 2019).

Hewa reaches the same structural goal through the strategic plan, with the emphasis falling less on review and more on redistribution of ownership.

Making sure the work is mission-aligned and built into the strategic plan is critical. Rather than having equity appear in only one section of the plan, it is embedded across every strategic priority. That also speaks to shared ownership across the organization. It means people are working on it as part of their own roles, rather than treating it as something that belongs only to my office. (Hewa, Interview 2)

Hewa's phrases "built into the strategic plan," "embedded across every strategic priority," and "shared ownership" show that baking equity in requires dispersing responsibility beyond the equity office itself. The movement in her account is from concentration to distribution, with the work becoming stronger because it stops depending on a single office to carry it alone. The line "part of their own roles" reveals the structural change she is after, since participants had already described how easily institutions could isolate, rename, or sideline equity work when it remained attached to one office or one politically exposed title. Ray's mechanism describing the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources clarifies why this redistribution matters, since by redistributing ownership across the strategic plan, Hewa is reworking the resource arrangement that previously concentrated equity labor in one office and left it disposable when pressure rose (Ray, 2019). Hewa's approach makes equity more difficult to treat as optional because it travels with the work other people are already required to do.

Maji extends the same logic into committee architecture, with embeddedness operating through roles that carry equity accountability into rooms the CDO does not directly occupy.

There's a member from the Admin and Finance Committee on the DEI committee, a member from the Student Affairs Committee on the DEI committee. And what I work with them on is this, if you are a member of the DEI committee, you are an equity anchor, that's your identity. We're going to talk about equity here, and when you're in your other committees, the expectation is that you're going to ask questions through a lens of equity. What is the equity issue in whatever you're discussing? In that way, we're multiplying the effect of the committee. It's not just what am I doing, and do they bless it. It's actually what are you doing to influence your colleagues? (Maji, Interview 1)

Maji's phrase "equity anchor" names a role that travels with committee members beyond the meeting in which it is assigned. Her description of "multiplying the effect" shows that the point is distributed interpretive labor, since the question "what is the equity issue in whatever you're discussing?" turns equity from a special topic into a recurring prompt that members are expected to carry back into the committees they already inhabit. Interest convergence helps

clarify why Maji built the structure this way, since equity work that depends on voluntary goodwill remains fragile when institutional interests shift (Bell, 1992). By attaching equity responsibility to committee roles, Maji moves the work from blessing to expectation and from centralized permission to distributed influence.

Ardhi reaches the same aspiration through redundancy, mentorship, and distributed capacity, with the future of the work located in who can carry it if she is gone.

I try to structure the work so that other people can adopt it. I almost always use co-chairs or tri-chairs for anything I lead so that others are learning alongside me and can carry the work forward. In resilience literature, that is what building redundancies looks like. (Ardhi, Interview 2)

The phrases "other people can adopt it," "carry the work forward," and "building redundancies" show that Ardhi is thinking about embeddedness as a resilience problem as well as an equity problem, since her strategy begins with the question of whether the work can continue once the current leader is absent, displaced, or politically constrained. That question gives "redundancies" its force, because Ardhi is building institutional memory and distributed capacity at the level of people as well as formal design. Hartley et al.'s strategic direction domain helps clarify what is happening here, with Ardhi planning across a longer horizon in which durability depends on how many people are learning the work while it is still possible to learn it (Hartley et al., 2015).

Busara names a different form of structural embeddedness, one that moves through governance and funding architecture and treats durability as a question of what the institution is willing to sustain materially.

The work is being fundamentally integrated into the core operations of academic departments. With explicit presidential authorization, I have to work with HR to create a new, mandatory, equity and inclusion review process in all non-academic units, signifying a definitive shift from episodic initiatives to an enduring, steady state of institutional practice. (Busara, Interview 2)

Busara's phrase "steady state of institutional practice" captures the endpoint participants were reaching for across the subtheme, since steady state identifies a condition in which equity no longer must arrive each time as an initiative needing special defense. Her account also widens the analysis by locating embeddedness in the institution's material structure, including policy review, HR process, strategic planning, and the movement of equity-committed staff from soft grant funding into institutional lines. Her self-description elsewhere as "a numbers person" matters here because it reveals a form of institutional fluency that understands durability as financial and structural as well as moral. Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice clarifies why material embeddedness carries this weight, since steady state means closing the gap between formal commitment and the everyday processes through which institutional priorities are enacted (Ray, 2019). Embeddedness becomes real when the work is tied to mechanisms the institution already protects, funds, and recognizes as part of its ordinary operation.

Huruma carries the subtheme in a different direction by showing that embeddedness can also take shape through belonging, language, physical design, and the inclusion of spaces and populations that institutions often treat as peripheral.

The work we have been doing over the past three years has really been grounded in belonging, more than in equity alone. My office is seen as a hub for community and belonging. It was very important to me that the name we chose had integrity and reflected who we are as an institution, including our values, our strategic plan, our vision, and our institutional pillars. I wanted the language to align with all of those elements. (Huruma, Interview 2)

Huruma's use of "grounded in belonging," "hub for community and belonging," and "had integrity" shows that baking equity in can also move through institutional language, environmental design, and the widening of who counts as central to the institution's self-understanding. Her related insistence that the online school be treated as "a central part" of the

work extends the same logic, since embeddedness in her account means refusing structures that quietly exclude through omission while still claiming inclusion rhetorically. The CRT critique of liberalism and colorblindness clarifies what she is refusing, since the institutional habit of treating peripheral spaces as appropriately invisible while maintaining inclusive rhetoric is the colorblind formalism the tenet identifies as a structural problem rather than a neutral arrangement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The alignment she is building among name, values, strategic plan, vision, and pillars shows that she is trying to make the work difficult to sever from the institution's own declared identity.

Ulinzi adds one more crucial dimension by showing that, in periods when formal structure remains incomplete, relational continuity can function as a durable institutional form.

The advocates follow through, meeting with the director of the Counseling Center, asking what we need, joining the committees. I formed a cohort with the VP for Student Life, a student support workgroup, and everybody in that office comes every time. Those folks get it. They're like, don't go anywhere, DEI people, we love you. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi's phrases "follow through," "comes every time," and "don't go anywhere" show that embeddedness can be built through repetition, committee participation, and collective commitment before it is fully codified in formal mechanism, since the continuity she describes turns advocates into part of the institution's carrying structure. Their repeated presence makes the work less dependent on one office's isolated labor and more dependent on a network of people who keep showing up. Weick's social sensemaking concept helps clarify what these advocates are doing alongside the equity office, because they are building a shared understanding of what the work means and why it belongs, and that shared understanding becomes one of the forms through which the work survives pressure (Weick, 1995).

Across cases, participants shared a belief that work easily removed would eventually be removed. Subira and Busara wove equity through governance structures, review cycles, HR

processes, and financial designs. Hewa wove equity through strategic planning and redistributed ownership. Maji wove equity through committee design and role-based accountability. Ardhi wove equity through redundancy, mentorship, and distributed learning. Huruma wove equity through belonging, mission alignment, and inclusion of spaces treated as peripheral. Ulinzi showed that relational systems can become durable when people continue to join, ask, and return. These differences show that participants were pursuing the same horizon through different forms of leverage, shaped by how much authority, permission, and institutional backing they had.

The limits of this aspiration mattered as much as its accomplishments. Busara's account shows one form of constrained durability, where the work could remain alive but had to move through adaptive language and new nomenclature. Roho's experience reveals a deeper fragility because her effort to embed equity into the general education curriculum remained deferred, and her broader account cast DEI as something institutions could quickly treat as expendable when financial or political pressure intensified. Moto's experience stood as the clearest outer edge of the subtheme, since where most participants were still trying to secure durability by weaving equity into policies, practices, and institutional routines, Moto had largely lost faith in the premise that such embedding would hold inside his institution. His account suggests that structures built inside the institution could be undone, absorbed, or discarded when institutional commitment weakened.

This subtheme therefore carries both accomplishment and horizon. Participants were moving from influence toward infrastructure, but the degree to which that move could be realized depended on real permission, positional leverage, and institutional backing. Baking it in was the most durable strategy participants could imagine, and it was also the strategy most

dependent on whether the institution would allow equity to become part of its ordinary life rather than keeping it attached to the labor of a single exposed leader.

Participants often described preservation as resistance, yet that relationship deserves closer examination. Interest convergence suggests that institutions may tolerate, and at times welcome, equity work that has become quieter, less costly, and reputationally safer because it allows them to maintain the appearance of commitment with limited institutional risk (Bell, 1992). From this perspective, baking equity in through new language and dampening its visibility can serve two purposes at once. For the CDO, these strategies may preserve a foothold for the work. For the institution, they may produce a version of equity that is easier to manage, fund, and publicly defend.

The same embedded and renamed equity function that a participant experiences as a hard-won achievement may also reflect the level of equity commitment the institution was already prepared to support. Preservation functions as resistance when the substance of the work reaches beyond what the institution would otherwise have permitted, although the findings do not always make that distinction fully visible. Naming this ambiguity recognizes participants' strategic skill while also locating that skill inside an institutional bind that political astuteness alone cannot resolve.

Cross-Case Analysis of Theme Three: Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness

Across Theme Three, participants described resistant political praxis as a repertoire of action that carried equity work farther than formal authority alone would allow. Coalition-building, evidence-making, and structural embeddedness were linked practices rather than separate strategies, because together they emerged from participants' recognition that institutions

could absorb moral argument, delay action, and protect existing distributions of power unless equity work became harder to isolate, dismiss, or remove. What participants described was agency exercised under constraint, with each move shaped by the shared understanding that equity work would survive only if it could travel through people, processes, and structures the institution already treated as consequential.

The three subthemes show how that praxis moved from relationship to persuasion to infrastructure. Subtheme 3a showed that coalition-building created the relational conditions for movement, especially when formal authority was insufficient. Participants found co-conspirators, lifelines, presidents, committee partners, peer networks, advocates, and people who would keep carrying the work when the CDO was absent from the room. Subtheme 3b showed how participants made the case for equity by joining receipts and heartbeats, using data, frameworks, disaggregated findings, mission alignment, and calibrated relational appeals to make equity claims harder to dismiss. Subtheme 3c showed participants turning toward embeddedness, trying to place equity into governance, review cycles, strategic plans, committee architecture, HR processes, funding structures, belonging practices, and relational systems that could survive beyond any one person.

The cross-case pattern in Subtheme 3a is especially strong because every participant treated coalition as necessary and formal authority as insufficient. The patterned differences lie in how coalition was built and where participants found leverage. Ardhi, Roho, Huruma, and Mwerevu relied most visibly on relational power, building influence through trust, care, credibility, and the steady labor of identifying who would carry the work when the institution would not. Maji, Subira, and Busara moved more often through structural power, designing committees, overlapping circles, and governance relationships that could widen reach and create

redundancy across institutional sites. Moto and Ulinzi show how coalition tightens under pressure, with Moto assembling protective peer networks once ordinary channels grew unstable and Ulinzi aligning people around mission and values so the work could remain legible as language shifted. Hartley et al.'s building alignment and alliances domain clarifies why these differences matter, given that participants were constructing the conditions under which equity work could keep moving when positional authority had narrowed (Hartley et al., 2015).

Subtheme 3b shows the same shared pressure expressed through persuasion. Participants described an elevated burden of proof that required them to pair receipts and heartbeats rather than rely on one alone. Hewa, Subira, Busara, and Huruma leaned most visibly into evidentiary and infrastructural forms of persuasion, using disaggregated data, dashboards, frameworks, review processes, and mission alignment to make equity claims harder to evade once they entered institutional conversation. Maji, Ardhi, Ulinzi, and Roho show a complementary pattern in which persuasion depended on calibration, translation, values, and disciplined attention to what a particular audience could hear. Mwerevu and Moto stand at the outer edge of the subtheme because their accounts reveal the point at which repeated explanation and documentation become institutional data of their own, teaching them when persuasion has reached its limit. Ray's mechanism describing the legitimated unequal distribution of organizational resources clarifies the structural condition underneath these accounts, because the burden of proof participants described was one expression of an institution already deciding whose knowledge arrived as credible and whose knowledge had to arrive armored with documentation, translation, and consequence before it would be received (Ray, 2019).

Subtheme 3c carries the praxis to its deepest strategic horizon, where participants turned from influence toward embeddedness because they had learned that anything easy to remove

would eventually be removed. The strongest structural power architects in this subtheme were Maji, Subira, Busara, and Hewa, each of whom worked to attach equity to mechanisms the institution already recognized as central, including committee architecture, review cycles, governance structures, HR processes, strategic plans, and financial lines. Ardhi, Huruma, and Ulinzi show a differently textured but equally important pattern, with embeddedness built through redundancy, distributed learning, belonging-centered design, advocates who "come every time," and institutional language that aligns equity with declared values. Ray's mechanism describing the racialized decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice clarifies why this move mattered so much, because participants were trying to close the gap between an institution's public language about equity and the routine organizational processes through which priorities are enforced, funded, and carried forward (Ray, 2019). These accomplishments remain in productive tension with the language of precarity that organized Theme One. The leader who described herself as a "floating island" also negotiated directly with her president for a director-level promotion and a new team. Participants who described leading an "office of one" also endowed offices, rewrote bylaws, redirected funding lines, and placed equity on board agendas three times each year. This tension is a defining feature of the role. The CDOs in this study were under-resourced and structurally significant at the same time, and their fluency in naming constraint existed alongside real, though uneven, institutional power. Holding both dimensions offers a fuller account of equity leadership and makes visible the leverage institutions too often rely upon without adequately resourcing, protecting, or formally authorizing it.

The cross-case pattern across Theme Three also depends on a CRT framing that makes resistant political praxis intelligible in racial terms. Interest convergence clarifies why embeddedness mattered so much to participants, since equity work that remained dependent on

institutional goodwill could not survive the moments when that goodwill receded under political, financial, or reputational pressure (Bell, 1992). The critique of liberalism and colorblindness clarifies why the entire repertoire of coalition-building, persuasion, and structural embeddedness was necessary in the first place, as the colorblind formalism that organizes most institutional decision-making cannot be relied upon to do equity work on its own and treats race-conscious labor as the deviation requiring justification rather than as the corrective requiring institutional support (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The intersectional dimension also matters across the theme, since participants' coalition-building, persuasion, and embeddedness work was shaped by the identity positions through which their institutions had already decided how much trust, credibility, and authority each of them carried into the rooms where strategy had to land (Crenshaw, 1989).

In combination, the idiographic-to-thematic movement across Theme Three shows that participants were doing far more than protecting isolated programs or keeping the language of equity alive under hostile conditions. They were reading their institutions closely, deciding where movement remained possible, and building layered forms of practice that could widen what those institutions might be made to do. The shared pattern across coalition-building, persuasion, and structural embeddedness reveals that participants understood anti-DEI hostility as a condition requiring political intelligence, relational discipline, and long-range design all at once. The variation across cases shows where each participant found leverage, how much authority they had to formalize it, and what kinds of relationships or structures their institutions would sustain.

Theme Three answers the research question directly because participants were responding to anti-DEI hostility through resistant political praxis. They interpreted hostile environments, identified where influence still lived, built relationships that could carry the work,

made equity claims harder to dismiss, and sought to embed equity into institutional routines that could outlast any single office, person, or political moment. Their strategies were neither purely defensive nor naïvely hopeful, but rather grounded, tactical, and future-oriented, shaped by a clear understanding of institutional constraint and by a refusal to let constraint become the final limit of the work.

As participants built coalitions, made the case, and baked equity into institutional life, they were also confronting quieter questions that strategy alone could not settle. They were asking how to keep themselves whole, how to hold onto the deepest truths about who they were, and how to decide whether the path ahead still led toward possibility or toward diminishing returns. The external work of resistant political praxis therefore opened into an internal labor of restoration, identity, and discernment. Theme Four emerges from that pressure directly, turning from what participants built inside institutions to how they sustained themselves, protected their meaning, and imagined futures beyond the limits those institutions imposed.

Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis

By the time participants reached the terrain gathered in Theme Four, they had already described institutional retreat, embodied harm, and the strategic labor required to keep equity work alive. What surfaced here was the work of claiming authority over meaning, worth, and future for themselves, with participants describing how they stayed in relationship with who they were while institutions kept pressing against their bodies, spirits, and sense of possibility. Across cases, survival took shape as an interpretive and future-facing practice grounded in restoration, self-definition, and the disciplined evaluation of where hope could still live.

The language of the theme came from the words participants used when naming what they were protecting and what they were moving toward. Maji described an intentional yearly

practice of protecting her own peace, treating it as something she was responsible for defending rather than something the institution would preserve on her behalf. Busara described learning to inhabit her identity without apology or explanation, claiming the whole of who she was as the ground from which she led. Hewa insisted on leading as herself, refusing to reshape her voice, posture, or authority to fit expectations calibrated to someone else's idea of leadership. Roho anchored herself in the conviction that every person is entitled to dignity and recognition, making that conviction the steady ground underneath strategy. Subira carried the obligation to continue the work without being required to complete it, holding long-horizon commitment without collapsing into the fantasy of personal arrival. Moto named the hardest edge of the theme when he questioned whether the institutional version of the work had become a vessel already going down, one from which he needed to build toward a different horizon entirely. Taken together, these accounts show counter-narrative functioning as survival, with participants refusing to let institutional misrecognition, extraction, or disappointment determine the final meaning of their labor or the worth of the person doing it.

The three subthemes trace that refusal across a clear internal arc. Participants first described how they filled their cups and guarded their peace so that the work did not consume every part of them. They then named the unapologetic core of who they were, drawing on identity, inheritance, faith, community, and chosen responsibility as sources of selfhood the institution had not created and could not revoke. They finally questioned their path forward, asking whether the future called for recommitment, strategic pivoting, protected realism, or radical redirection toward forms of labor the institution could no longer define. What Theme Four collectively reveals is a form of survival organized around self-protection, claimed meaning, and future imagination, with participants holding onto hope where they could, naming

limits where they had to, and refusing to let the institution stand as the only horizon available to them.

Filling Our Cups, Guarding Our Peace

The language of this subtheme came from the way participants described restoration as work that had to be chosen, protected, scheduled, and defended if the institution was not going to consume everything around it. Maji gave the second half of the title its clearest wording when she described an annual intention to "preserve my peace," treating peace as something she was responsible for noticing, defending, and reasserting when people or conditions began to drain it. Hewa described a similar recalibration when she began to "work to live rather than live to work," while Busara named restoration through "nonnegotiable" time at the gym and Subira named it through daily practices that gave him something "entirely outside of work." Roho carried care into art journaling and plants, Ardhi into prayer, walking, delegation, and clearer boundaries, Mwerevu into a "happiness journey" that required time away and strategic honesty with himself, Huruma into being grounded and flexible, and Ulinzi into repeated acts of care she described as "little doses" that kept the soul going even when pain remained. Together, these accounts show that filling their cups and guarding their peace was not a decorative layer added after the real work was done, since it was part of the real work, because participants had learned that anti-DEI hostility would keep drawing from them unless they built ways of replenishing what the institution would not restore on its own.

The subtheme is organized into two distinct patterns. One, illustrated most completely by Hewa, Maji, Subira, Busara, and Mwerevu, emphasizes a structure in which restoration becomes regularized as daily routine, using mechanisms such as therapy, changing perspectives, participating in rituals, engaging in physical activity or other activities designed to improve

health, taking time for oneself and establishing boundaries to create stability that can be replicated rather than spontaneously created. The second pattern illustrates a form of restoration as relational, spiritual, and affective protection, demonstrated most clearly through Roho, Ardhi, Huruma, and Ulinzi, who described caring through plants, prayer, friendships, laughter and humor, family relationships, and practices that protect the spirit at least as much as the body. Moto is unique when compared to both categories, since he describes a position outside the capacity for restoration to be perceived as returning, continuing to participate in his restorative practices while those practices function as part of being alive and as ways of coping with irreversible loss rather than as means to restore something that may have been fully recoverable. This difference is important because it demonstrates the full range of the subtheme, from replenishing toward a prior self to the more difficult process of learning how to live with damage that has become permanent.

Hewa names the first cluster with unusual clarity, because her account treats care as a disciplined shift in how the job is held.

I recently started seeing a therapist, and that was really a sign that I knew I needed help. After I made that appointment, I found myself functioning better overall. What sustains me now is keeping the job in perspective. I try to work to live rather than live to work. This job will exist whether I am here or not, and that perspective matters. (Hewa, Interview 2)

Hewa's phrases "knew I needed help," "functioning better," and "keeping the job in perspective" show that care in her account begins with recognition rather than denial, since she names a point at which the old relationship to work had become untenable and then describes a deliberate reordering of scale in which the job is no longer allowed to occupy the whole field of meaning. The sentence "this job will exist whether I am here or not" gives that reordering its full force, because the perspective she is building depends on refusing the fiction that the role is worth

unlimited bodily or psychic sacrifice. Her account sits in clear conversation with Maji's intention to "preserve my peace," since both participants are describing restoration as an act of governance over the self, a way of deciding that the institution will not be permitted to define the terms of endurance unilaterally.

Maji, Subira, Busara, and Mwerevu deepen that same pattern by showing how replenishment is made repeatable. Maji's annual practice of setting an intention to "preserve my peace" turns restoration into a recurring interpretive discipline rather than an emergency response. Subira's daily combination of meditation, exercise, therapy, and singing creates a life that keeps one part of the self "entirely outside of work," which matters because it prevents the role from becoming the only place where meaning lives. Busara's insistence that the gym is "nonnegotiable" and that travel remains part of how she restores herself gives the cluster a more physical and unapologetic edge, while Mwerevu's description of a "happiness journey" and of leave as a chance to distinguish real work from "performance" shows that rest can also become a site of clarity about what deserves continued investment. Across these accounts, restoration is being built through repetition, design, and a refusal to treat care as whatever remains after everyone else has taken what they need.

Roho's account shifts the subtheme into a different texture of care, one in which restoration moves through nurturing, redirection, and the creation of something living that can receive the care the institution never stops drawing from her.

I do art journaling. I also have a ridiculous number of plants. Caring for them gives me a way to direct my own care and nurturing into something that feels grounding and productive. (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho's use of "care and nurturing" grounds the account in a transfer of energy rather than in escape, since the plants matter because they receive what the institution has been taking, and

"grounding and productive" matters because she is describing a form of restoration that lets care become visible, tangible, and sustaining rather than endlessly absorbed into administrative demand. Her account sits close to Ardhi's emphasis on directing "mental, emotional, and spiritual energy" toward what matters most and to Huruma's sense of being grounded in what matters at this stage of life, because all three are reorganizing their inner economy around what deserves care rather than around whatever the institution happens to demand next. The subtheme becomes clearer when read through those connections, since restoration is functioning here as a reallocation of attention, feeling, and responsibility toward what can hold life rather than merely extract it.

Ulinzi's account carries that logic into the condition of ongoing pain, where care remains necessary while relief arrives in fragments rather than in resolution.

I do a great deal of what people would call self-care. I garden, make pottery, knit, go to therapy, get massage, and make time for practices that help me stay grounded. I do more of that now than ever before. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Earlier in a previous theme, Ulinzi describes the soul as something that has to be fed in "little doses," and that phrasing gives this cluster one of its clearest truths. Her practices are numerous because the depletion is ongoing, and the multiplication of care does not signal excess so much as the scale of what must be countered if she is going to remain livable to herself. Weick's (1995) concept of ongoing process helps clarify why her account feels different from Hewa's or Maji's, because Ulinzi is speaking from inside continuation rather than from any sense of neat recovery. The work of staying grounded keeps happening because the pressure keeps happening, which means that therapy, art, friendship, and bodily practices are carrying an everyday protective function rather than a restorative one-time fix.

Huruma and Ardhi give the subtheme a final layer by showing that peace is also guarded through the arrangement of life itself. Huruma's account of being grounded in what matters, drawing perspective from her children, and making room for humor and levity shows that care can be built through proportion, with family life and lightness preventing the institution from becoming the single measure of seriousness. Ardhi's account of prayer, walking, spiritual mentors, delegation, and a stronger refusal to overextend does related work, though she names it more explicitly as a question of what kind of person she wants to be "long term." Their accounts matter because they show that filling the cup requires more than adding soothing practices, since it also requires decisions about time, priority, obligation, and the shape of daily life that make exhaustion less likely to become the only available truth.

Moto stands as the subtheme's hardest divergence because he speaks from beyond the point where peace can mean return to an earlier self.

I spend more time in nature now. I meditate more, and I stay connected to communities that reinforce my values. (Moto, Interview 2)

Read beside his wider earlier account of bodily "breakdown" and strained relationships, these practices take on a different meaning than they do in the other cases. Nature, meditation, and community are present in Moto's account, though they function as recalibration after damage that he already understands as lasting rather than as restoration toward a prior state. That difference gives the whole subtheme greater depth, because it shows that participants' care practices sit at different points along the arc of extraction. Some are preserving peace before depletion takes everything it can take. Others are feeding the soul in increments while the drain continues. Moto is building a way to live after the body has already become a record of what the institution required and refused to repair. The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling clarifies what remains available across even these differences, since participants keep drawing on relational, spiritual,

embodied, and communal resources whose authority predates the institution and whose meaning the institution did not author and cannot fully take away (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The convergence in this subtheme lies in the moral seriousness with which participants approached care, since they treated restoration as essential labor, guarded peace as something that had to be actively defended and built forms of replenishment specific enough to meet the shape of the harm they were carrying. The variation lies in where participants were positioned along that arc and in what their lives allowed them to build around the work. Hewa, Maji, Subira, Busara, and Mwerevu created structured practices that kept the institution from occupying every part of the self. Roho, Ardhi, Huruma, and Ulinzi guarded the spirit through care, grounding, friendship, humor, and ritual forms of replenishment that met ongoing depletion with steady counterforce. Moto, standing at the edge of irreversibility, shows why the subtheme matters so much, because his account makes clear what can happen when institutions keep extracting long after the person has begun trying to protect what remains. The cross-case pattern therefore reveals that peace was made, guarded, and defended rather than supplied, and that filling the cup was one of the ways participants refused to let institutional extraction become the only story their bodies and spirits could tell.

The practices of care gathered here were directed toward something more durable than calm alone, because participants were protecting a self that the institution had never fully authored and could never fully claim. The next subtheme moves inside that deeper terrain, tracing the unapologetic core of who participants were and the sources of identity, inheritance, and purpose that made the protection of peace worth the effort in the first place.

The Unapologetic Core of Who We Are

This subtheme shows what participants were protecting when they guarded their peace, because the practices of restoration traced in 4a were directed toward a self the institution had never fully authored and could never fully claim. Across accounts, participants described a source of selfhood and purpose that preceded institutional judgment and remained more durable than it, whether that source was intergenerational inheritance, faith, immigrant memory, queer self-making, scholarly vocation, racialized experience, or a consciously claimed responsibility to use one's position in service of others.

This terrain differs from the identity-based exposure traced in Subtheme 2c, where participants' identities became the mechanism through which scrutiny, vulnerability, and institutional misrecognition were distributed. Here, those same identities reappear as sources of self-definition, inherited strength, moral clarity, and chosen purpose, giving participants a way to remain legible to themselves when institutional readings kept distorting who they were. Weick's (1995) identity construction concept helps clarify that shift, because participants were continually revising who they understood themselves to be in relation to environments that kept offering narrowed or diminished readings of their worth, while the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling underscores that these lived histories, convictions, and inherited resources function as authoritative sources of knowledge that the institution neither created nor has the power to dissolve (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The language of the subtheme came most directly from Busara, who described learning over time to inhabit her identity in an "unapologetic way," while Hewa named the same stance through her insistence on leading "on my own terms." Roho located her core in a conviction about dignity and liberation that she described as nonnegotiable, Ardhi located hers in the lives

of her grandmothers and in an obligation to "expand the franchise," Ulinzi grounded hers in immigrant and Arab identity and in the practical knowledge those identities had given her about vulnerability and survival, Huruma described a self that had to be built before it could be named, Subira tied his leadership to a longer scholarly project of listening to people who had not been heard, Maji connected her work to multiracial and bicultural fluency and to an obligation to use positional advantage responsibly, Mwerevu named the force of being Black and queer in the South, and Moto described an early life that made injustice impossible to treat as abstraction. Taken together, these accounts show that the unapologetic core was the durable ground from which participants interpreted the institution, refused its diminishing readings, and decided what kind of person they would remain while doing the work. Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) counter-storytelling tenet is especially useful here, because participants were offering accounts of self and purpose that challenged the institution's preferred story about who counted as credible, legible, or authoritative.

Three orientations organize the subtheme. One orientation, represented by Ardhi, Hewa, and Ulinzi, focuses on how the core of who they are has its roots in inheritance, ancestral history, and social position, with their identities functioning as historical orientations to their profession based on what was passed down to them from previous generations. A second orientation, represented by Busara, Huruma, and Mwerevu, emphasizes consciously identified selfhood, since these participants identified their own sense of self and described having to create that identity themselves due to environments that did not have many role models for them or that held negative views of some aspects of who they were. A third orientation, represented by Roho, Subira, Maji, and Moto, emphasizes a moral or intellectual calling, with these participants drawing on spirituality, academic pursuits, structural analyses, and commitment to helping others

as the basis for the continuous connection between their sense of self and how they chose to lead. The difference among the three orientations lies in where each participant established the base of their core rather than in whether each one was stable, since all participants established a base for their self-identification outside of institutional approval.

Hewa names that refusal with exceptional clarity when she describes the standard she is being measured against and the terms on which she declines it. Hewa's insistence on leading on her own terms returns here from Subtheme 2c, where it first named her refusal to perform authority through a racialized and gendered script. The repetition is deliberate, since in 2c the phrase surfaced as resistance to institutional misrecognition, while in 4b it surfaces as the authored core from which that resistance became possible. The movement between those two meanings is itself part of what Hewa's account reveals.

Being Asian American and a woman means I experience both racism and sexism, and the combination of the two. I have been told I do not have executive presence because I do not project a white, masculine style of leadership. But I am not going to perform leadership in a way that is not authentic to me. I want to lead on my own terms.
(Hewa, Interview 1)

The phrase "on my own terms" gives Hewa's account its full force, because it marks the point where institutional judgment stops functioning as the measure of self-understanding. She knows the standard being applied to her, and she names it clearly enough to refuse it without pretending it has not cost her anything. Her account belongs in this subtheme because the center of gravity has shifted from the injury of misrecognition to the self-definition that survives that misrecognition without borrowing its logic. Ray's (2019) mechanism describing hegemonic whiteness as an organizational credential clarifies the script Hewa is refusing, because "executive presence" in her account is carrying a white masculine template of authority that the institution treats as ordinary and neutral. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality tenet sharpens the same point,

since the pressure she is naming is produced through the convergence of race and gender rather than through either identity in isolation. Hewa's insistence on leading "on my own terms" therefore functions as both identity construction and counter-definition, with selfhood becoming clearer as the institution's script becomes more visible.

Busara's account reaches the same terrain from a different direction, because the self she names as "unapologetic" is one she learned to inhabit over time. Busara describes a years-long process of learning to carry her immigrant identity, accent, and multilingualism "in an unapologetic way," looking at features others might read as deficits through an asset lens instead. That language matters because it makes the core, she is protecting feel consciously built and consciously claimed. The accent is part of this. So is the immigrant story. So is the decision to stop treating those features as something that needs softening in professional space. Busara's account therefore belongs to the same cluster as Hewa's while producing a different effect. Hewa rejects a dominant leadership script that was never built for her. Busara revalues the very parts of herself that institutions often hear through diminishment. Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) counter-storytelling tenet helps clarify why the account carries so much weight, because Busara is producing a competing story of worth in which immigrant identity and accent function as evidence of knowledge and strength rather than as markers of deficiency. Her unapologetic stance becomes a way of speaking herself back into view on terms the institution did not invent.

Ardhi carries the subtheme into intergenerational inheritance, where the core is anchored less in refusal than in obligation carried forward from those who came before her.

My grandmother was a janitor. And a domestic. My other grandmother was a domestic too. Neither of them had more than an eighth grade education, because they did not have access to higher education, to high schools in their area, much less colleges and universities. And so I really carry that with me as I think about how I expand the franchise. (Ardhi, Interview 1)

The phrase "carry that with me" identifies the core of Ardhi's account with unusual precision, because it makes ancestry active in the present rather than leaving it as background. The grandmothers in this passage are the reason the work has its moral shape. Their exclusion gives "expand the franchise" its exact meaning, turning the language of access into something familial, historical, and accountable to named women whose lives were narrowed by institutions like the ones Ardhi now moves through professionally. The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling helps clarify the resource she is drawing on here, because the knowledge guiding her work is carried through family history, structural memory, and obligation rather than granted by professional title or institutional recognition (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ardhi's core holds because its authority predates the institution and remains answerable to people the institution never had the chance to authorize in the first place.

Ulinzi extends that same inheritance pattern into immigrant and Arab identity, though her version is shaped less by ancestry alone and more by the practical knowledge those identities have given her about interconnected harm, risk, and responsibility. She describes a defining realization that the suffering in her country of origin and the racism experienced around her in the United States were connected, and once that connection became clear it reorganized how she understood the work. Her account also insists that these are practical guides, which means that identity in this subtheme is functioning as a disciplined way of reading the world and deciding how to move within it. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality tenet helps clarify the layered identity work underneath that practical knowledge, since Ulinzi's reading of vulnerability and interconnection draws on the convergence of nationality, racialization, immigration status, and gendered exposure rather than on any single axis alone. Ulinzi's core therefore becomes a source of survival knowledge, with immigrant and Arab life shaping how she understands vulnerability,

interconnectedness, and what ethical action requires when institutions refuse to read those links clearly.

Huruma's account shows a different route to the same kind of durability, because the self she carries into leadership had to be built in the absence of the language and mirrors that might have made recognition easier.

I'm 51, and I grew up at a time when there was no internet. There were not queer people on television shows, really, and if there were, it was coded and I was not picking up on it. My family did not know any queer people. I just did not have language around identity.
(Huruma, Interview 1)

Huruma's phrase "did not have language around identity" carries the developmental weight of the account, because it names a self that had to be assembled before it could be publicly named. Language matters here because it helps the self become legible to itself, and when that language is unavailable recognition has to be built through slower and more interior forms of knowing. That is why Huruma's steadiness in leadership reads differently here than it did in Theme Two, since the institution may still challenge her, though it meets a self that was forged under conditions of invisibility long before workplace judgments arrived. Weick's (1995) identity construction concept is especially helpful here, because Huruma's core was constructed through a long process of becoming legible to herself without external scaffolding. Her later emphasis on humility, grace, pluralism, and white responsibility shows that the self she built is not merely affirmed and is ethically organized, with purpose and accountability formed alongside recognition.

Mwerevu sharpens the same cluster by naming how Black queer experience in the South shaped the kind of world he wanted to build for people who came after him. His account matters because it ties identity to future-making, since the core he describes is also a source of obligation, with his own experiences of exclusion, silence, and marginality becoming part of why

he could not be satisfied with merely surviving within existing institutional terms. That forward orientation places him close to Huruma in one sense, because both accounts describe a core that had to be actively assembled, while his adds a sharper political charge grounded in the desire to interrupt repetition for those coming after him. The self he protects in this subtheme is already oriented toward others, which means that identity clarity becomes both personal coherence and a refusal to reproduce the conditions that formed him. Intersectionality is visible in the specific texture of that core, where Blackness, queerness, masculinity, and Southern geography converge to shape a positionality that no single identity category can fully explain and that gives Mwerevu's future-making its particular ethical force (Crenshaw, 1989).

Roho and Subira give the subtheme a more explicitly moral and intellectual texture, with the core taking shape through conviction and vocation. Roho's insistence that all human beings are entitled to dignity and that she would "live on that" and "die on that" shows a core anchored in faith and liberation rather than in institutional recognition. Subira's account does similar work through scholarship, where his long-standing question about how to listen to those who have not been heard becomes the bridge between his faculty identity and his leadership identity. In both cases, the core is carried through a project that predates the institution's current reading of the work. Roho's dignity and Subira's recovery of unheard voices do not depend on the university's permission to exist. They give each participant a language of selfhood sturdy enough to outlast changes in title, climate, or political pressure. The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling helps hold these two accounts together, since both participants are drawing on epistemic resources the institution did not create, with Roho's theological and political inheritance and Subira's scholarly lineage functioning as durable sources of meaning that can be carried across settings (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Maji and Moto add one more crucial dimension, because both tie their core to sharpened structural awareness and responsibility. Maji's multiracial and bicultural experience has taught her how to move through complexity and how to recognize the positional advantages that lighter skin, particular speech patterns, and institutional fluency can confer. Her account belongs here because she frames that knowledge as obligation, using her relative safety to amplify others rather than disappearing into the privileges it provides. Moto's account does related work from a different angle, since the early othering and later structural recognition he describes become the reason he could not return to a more comfortable professional path once he understood what was at stake. In both accounts, the unapologetic core is inseparable from the clarity that power operates unevenly and that one's own location inside those uneven arrangements creates responsibility. Intersectionality is especially visible in Maji's account because the positionality she describes is layered, shifting, and differently legible across settings. Moto's account works through counter-storytelling, as his life experience authorizes a reading of injustice that institutional comfort would rather keep at the margins (Crenshaw, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The convergence in this subtheme lies in the fact that each participant draws on a source of selfhood and purpose the institution played no part in creating. Hewa, Busara, and Huruma show forms of self that had to be claimed and inhabited against dominant scripts. Ardhi and Ulinzi show selves anchored in family, ancestry, immigrant memory, and historically situated obligation. Roho, Subira, Maji, Mwerevu, and Moto show cores organized through vocation, structure, scholarship, faith, and responsibility to others. The variation lies in where that core is anchored and how it becomes active under pressure, while the shared pattern remains unmistakable. Participants had ways of knowing who they were that made institutional

misrecognition intelligible without making it authoritative. That is why the protection of peace in 4a carried so much weight, because what participants were protecting was the continuity of a self the institution could contest, burden, or misunderstand without ever fully possessing.

That continuity, however hard-won, left a harder question open. Once participants had named who they were outside the institution's judgment, they still had to decide whether their future belonged inside the arrangement that had already asked so much of them, and that is the question the final subtheme brings fully into view.

A Sinking Ship or a New Horizon? Questioning Our Path

This subtheme gathers the hardest question left open by the earlier parts of Theme Four, since once participants had protected their peace and named the core of who they were outside institutional judgment, they still had to decide whether their future belonged inside the arrangement that had already asked so much of them. The title emerged from that existential reckoning, with Moto giving the image of the "sinking ship" its sharpest language and a larger group of participants answering the same pressure through recommitment, adaptation, or redirection toward other forms of practice. Across cases, the question was shared and the answers diverged. Participants were evaluating where their labor still had meaning, what the institution had revealed itself to be, and how much more of themselves they were willing to place inside that arrangement.

Three orientations organize the subtheme. One orientation, represented most clearly by Hewa, Maji, Ardhi, Subira, and Busara, holds onto a future for the work through recommitment, rebuilding, or reframing, with participants locating possibility in permanence, distributed agency, long histories of institutional change, or a continued willingness to keep shaping the terms of the work. A second orientation, represented most clearly by Roho, Ulinzi, Huruma, and Mwerevu, is

more guarded and contingent, with future thinking organized around realism, preparedness, re-scaling, and the refusal to absorb institutional failure as personal failure. Moto stands apart as the clearest outlier, because his account crosses into radical redirection, relocating value almost entirely outside the institutional form of the work and naming the labor arrangement he is leaving with an uncompromising clarity. The variation therefore lies in where participants still located possibility, rather than in whether they still cared about the work itself.

Maji gives the subtheme one of its clearest counterweights to despair by grounding hope in an observation about social life rather than in institutional optimism.

At the broadest level, I find it almost fascinating that people think they can eliminate diversity. If you have more than two people in a room, you have diversity. That gives me hope, because there will always be a need for this work. (Maji, Interview 2)

Maji's phrases "you have diversity" and "there will always be a need for this work" matter because they relocate hope away from any one office, title, or political cycle and into the enduring fact of human difference itself. Her hope is unsentimental and structurally grounded. It does not depend on believing that institutions will suddenly become brave or consistent. It depends on the recognition that the underlying conditions requiring equity work cannot be legislated or renamed out of existence. That is why her related language about changing "with agency" and creating a narrative that feels "empowering rather than defeated" belongs here as well, since both accounts show future orientation organized around action within constraint rather than around waiting for institutional permission to return. Weick's (1995) plausibility over accuracy concept helps clarify the sensemaking at work, because Maji is building a future story from what remains workable and durable in the moment she is facing rather than from the institutional assurances she has already learned to distrust.

Hewa reaches the same horizon through permanence rather than through irony or reframing, with her future imagination attached to making the office itself harder to erase.

With all of the anti-DEI attacks, and with so many offices closing, I am asking myself how I can work toward endowing this office so that it remains here permanently.
(Hewa, Interview 2)

The phrase "remains here permanently" gives Hewa's account its distinctive future orientation, because she is answering a climate of closure and precarity with a plan for structural endurance. Her vision does not rest on motivational language or on the assumption that goodwill will return. It rests on the recognition that permanence has to be built if the work is going to outlast budget cycles, political retreat, and leadership turnover. Hartley et al.'s (2015) strategic direction and scanning domain helps clarify what Hewa is doing, since she is reading the political moment accurately enough to see that survival now requires long-range institutional design rather than short-term defense alone. Her future orientation therefore belongs firmly within the recommitment cluster, though it is a recommitment shaped by the institution's demonstrated fragility rather than by trust in its stability.

Ardhi and Subira deepen that same orientation in two different ways. Ardhi's claim that "the work of including people in structures that were not built for them long predates our current titles and offices" widens the horizon historically, making the current anti-DEI moment look like one chapter in a longer struggle rather than the final word on the work. Her practice of asking people to define their dreams for the institution and then work backward from them gives that historical continuity a visionary dimension, because she is refusing to let defensive institutional posture determine the outer edge of what people can still imagine. Subira's return to the faculty does related work through relocation rather than through institutional redesign, with his mantra that one is "not obligated to complete the work" and "not free to abandon it" preserving

obligation while changing the site in which that obligation is lived. Weick's (1995) identity construction concept is especially useful for Subira, since the move back to faculty revises the story of where the work can live while preserving the continuity of who he understands himself to be. Busara's account belongs with this cluster as well, though in a more questioning key, because she continues asking whether the institution's tools are serving the communities they claim to support and keeps the future open through disciplined interrogation rather than through easy reassurance.

Roho anchors a different orientation, one in which the question is no longer only whether the work matters and has become whether the role itself still deserves to be the aspiration people imagine it to be.

To reach the cabinet level is supposed to be the aspiration. That is what everyone says they want, a seat at the table. But once you get there, the experience can feel very different from the aspiration. I do not know whether people still want the role in the same way. (Roho, Interview 2)

Roho's repetition of "aspiration" and her final sentence about whether people "still want the role in the same way" show that the existential pressure of this subtheme reaches beyond immediate coping and into the very structure of ambition itself. She is not only reconsidering whether she personally can stay. She is reconsidering whether the institutional career story surrounding the role still holds after one has lived inside it. That is why her exploratory interest in consulting belongs in the same orientation. The future remains imaginable, though the institutional form of that future has become less convincing than it once appeared. Her account therefore helps define the pragmatic realism cluster, because it preserves purpose while withdrawing naïveté about where prestige, influence, and sustainability actually meet.

Ulinzi, Huruma, and Mwerevu sharpen that realism further by organizing the future around protected contingency rather than around faith in institutional repair.

My mentor told me, you are not going to change the whole world, so go for the low-hanging fruit and do not get yourself killed. And I have internalized that. If leadership does not want to listen, that is not my failure. (Ulinzi, Interview 2)

Ulinzi's phrases "do not get yourself killed" and "that is not my failure" show that her horizon is built through survival knowledge and redistributed accountability. The future remains possible in her account, although it is held inside a precise map of what she can change and what she will no longer absorb as her own deficiency. Huruma's inherited advice to keep her résumé updated performs related work, because preparedness becomes a form of stability when institutional contingency can no longer be denied. Mwerevu's counsel that "the truth is in when your feet are on the ground" and his warning that recruitment promises often fail to materialize extends that same realism into an act of transmission, with the future protected by telling the truth early enough that others can enter the work with fewer illusions. Counter-storytelling is especially visible in Mwerevu's account because he contests the institution's official story before it can shape someone else's expectations, replacing institutional promise with the version his experience has verified. Across these accounts, realism functions as care because it protects the self by refusing to let institutional promise define the future more powerfully than institutional pattern (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Moto stands apart because his future orientation has crossed into radical redirection, and the clarity of that move is what gives the subtheme its sharpest edge.

It is all a façade. This is a corporation, and at the end of the day people are going to act in ways that serve their own interests. This is a sinking ship. When mentees came to me saying they felt inspired to do this work, I used to tell them to look closely at the institution. Now I would tell them to run from this. That is how disillusioned I have become. (Moto, Interview 2)

I essentially decided to fast-track my career path by investing in whatever comes next for me. That meant working with a personal productivity coach. I am not going to put myself in another institutional environment where someone gets to tell me what I can say and

what I cannot say, because this has felt like sharecropping.
(Moto, Interview 2)

Moto's language leaves very little interpretive ambiguity, which is precisely why it should remain the outlier case rather than be diluted into a general pattern. The "sinking ship" image names his judgment of the institutional form itself, while "run from this" shows that his disillusionment has become transmissible advice rather than private despair. The word "sharecropping" sharpens that judgment into a compressed counter-story about racialized labor, with the institution benefiting from his work while withholding the conditions that would make that labor protected, equitable, or fully authorized. Counter-storytelling is visible in Moto's language because he replaces professional euphemism with a historically charged description of the labor arrangement as he understands it from inside. Enactment is also visible here because Moto's meaning-making moves from interpretation into action, reshaping his relationship to the institution itself. His new horizon appears in licensure, practice, mentorship, and the lives he can still touch beyond institutional control, while the institutional version of the work becomes something he no longer understands as recoverable (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Weick, 1995).

The convergence in this subtheme lies in the fact that every participant was evaluating the future through evidence rather than through institutional promise. The variation lies in the conclusions they drew from that evidence. Hewa, Maji, Ardhi, Subira, and Busara still located possibility in permanence, distributed agency, historical continuity, or careful reconstruction. Roho, Ulinzi, Huruma, and Mwerevu held onto the work through realism, preparedness, and the refusal to confuse institutional rhetoric with institutional reliability. Moto located the future almost entirely beyond the institutional form that had already cost him too much. What these patterned differences reveal is that participants were answering the same existential question with different calculations about what their institutions had demonstrated themselves to be, what

their bodies and spirits could still sustain, and where their labor could continue to matter with integrity. Ray's (2019) mechanism describing how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups helps clarify why the answers diverged as they did, because the capacity to imagine recommitment, contingency, or redirection was shaped by how much institutional support, structural permission, and durable leverage each participant had actually experienced rather than by disposition alone.

This subtheme therefore holds hope and disillusionment in deliberate tension rather than resolving them into a single future story. Participants did not arrive at one answer about whether the work could still live inside the institution, and the sharper pattern is that they arrived at one question and then answered it according to what the institution had shown them, what they still believed could be built there, and what parts of themselves they were no longer willing to surrender in order to remain. That tension is exactly what gives Theme Four its closing force, because it shows participants claiming authority over the future in the same way they had already claimed authority over peace and selfhood, refusing to let the institution stand as the only horizon available to them.

Cross-Case Analysis of Theme Four: Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis

Across Theme Four, participants were engaged in the same fundamental act of authorship, holding onto the right to define who they were, what their work meant, and where their future could still live after the institution had repeatedly tried to narrow all three. The shared pattern did not lie in one uniform emotional response or one single future orientation. It lay in the fact that every participant refused to let institutional extraction, misrecognition, or disappointment become the final account of their worth.

Counter-narrative, in this theme, functioned as survival because participants were drawing on sources of selfhood, conviction, and future imagination that predated the institution and remained available even when the institution had shown itself to be unstable, withholding, or incapable of sustaining the work on just terms. Weick's (1995) identity construction concept helps clarify the meaning-making labor gathered here, while the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling illuminates the inherited, relational, spiritual, and experiential resources participants were drawing on as authoritative forms of knowledge the institution had played no part in creating (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In Subtheme 4a, participants treated care as essential labor and approached restoration with a seriousness that made institutional language about wellness feel far too thin for what they were carrying. Hewa, Maji, Subira, Busara, and Mwerevu described structured, repeatable practices that kept the institution from occupying every part of the self, while Roho, Ardhi, Huruma, and Ulinzi described restoration through plants, prayer, friendship, humor, family, ritual, and other forms of replenishment that guarded the spirit as carefully as the body. Those two clusters reveal patterned differences in how peace was protected, with some participants building steadiness through daily architecture and others through relational and affective grounding. Moto stood apart within the subtheme because his account crossed into the terrain beyond reversibility, where nature, meditation, and community no longer functioned as practices of replenishment toward a prior self and instead became ways of living around losses he already understood as lasting. Counter-storytelling is visible in these practices because they refuse the institution's claim on the participant's whole self. At the level of body, spirit, and care, these practices protect forms of restoration that belong to the participant rather than to the role (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In Subtheme 4b, the cross-case pattern shifted from care to source, showing that participants were protecting selves the institution had not created and could not define for them. Ardhi, Hewa, and Ulinzi rooted that selfhood in inheritance, ancestry, and social location, with identity functioning as a historically situated orientation to the work. Busara, Huruma, and Mwerevu rooted it in consciously claimed selfhood, describing identities they had built, inhabited, and defended in environments that offered few mirrors or treated essential parts of who they were as deficit. Roho, Subira, Maji, and Moto rooted it in moral and intellectual vocation, drawing on faith, scholarship, structural awareness, and responsibility to others as the deepest continuity between who they were and how they led.

This subtheme operated through a different identity logic than Subtheme 2c. In Subtheme 2c, identity marked where harm landed most sharply. In Subtheme 4b, identity became the ground from which participants interpreted that harm, refused its diminishing terms, and remained recognizable to themselves under pressure. Ray's mechanism of whiteness as an organizational credential is visible in the institutional readings of legitimacy participants had to work against, while intersectionality is visible in the layered identities through which participants built authority, meaning, and self-recognition outside the institution's terms (Crenshaw, 1989; Ray, 2019).

Subtheme 4c brought the theme to its sharpest point of divergence because participants were living inside the same question of continued investment and answering it in different ways. Their answers reflected what their institutions had shown them, what their bodies and spirits could still sustain, and where the work still seemed capable of living with integrity. Hewa, Maji, Ardhi, Subira, and Busara held onto the future through recommitment, rebuilding, reframing, or relocation. Their hope was grounded in permanence, distributed agency, historical continuity,

and a continued willingness to shape the terms of the work. Roho, Ulinzi, Huruma, and Mwerevu occupied a more guarded and contingent position, holding onto purpose while orienting themselves through preparedness, realism, re-scaling, and the refusal to absorb institutional failure as personal failure. Moto stood apart as the subtheme's clearest point of divergence because his language of the "sinking ship," his warning that mentees should "run from this," and his description of institutional labor as "sharecropping" marked a radical redirection of meaning beyond the institution itself.

Interest convergence is visible in the future question participants were asking because they were reading what remained possible after institutional alignment with equity had weakened or dissolved (Bell, 1992). Some participants still found places where the work could be rebuilt, redistributed, or protected, while others began to see the institution as too unstable or self-protective to carry the future they imagined. Weick's concept of plausibility over accuracy is also visible here because participants were building workable futures from the most honest reading available to them, using what their institutions had already demonstrated as evidence for what kind of hope, commitment, or departure could still make sense (Weick, 1995).

Theme Four shows that participants responded to anti-DEI hostility through an inward and future-facing labor that was every bit as demanding as the strategic work traced in Theme Three. They built practices of restoration so that the institution would not consume the whole self, returned to sources of identity and purpose the institution had never created, and evaluated the future through the evidence of what the institution had already revealed rather than through the comfort of its official promises. Participants were not only navigating hostility, carrying its costs, and responding strategically. They were also making meaning in ways that protected selfhood, preserved dignity, and kept the future open on terms the institution could not fully

dictate. Theme Four closes the findings by showing that survival, in this study, was interpretive, relational, and visionary at once.

In this study, participants used counter-narrative as a form of survival and resistance, and they also used it to protect their sense of self. The analysis names that identity-protective work directly. When participants positioned themselves as clear-eyed resistors and their institutions as fearful or morally compromised, as in Moto's descriptions of a "sinking ship" and "sharecropping," the "unapologetic core," and the refusal to become "DEI-Jesus," they preserved their moral coherence while their institutions threatened it.

This interpretation does not question participants' sincerity. It recognizes that people construct self-narratives from particular positions, for particular purposes, and within particular relationships. Participants told these stories to a sympathetic researcher who shared their professional world, and they did so within the social-desirability pressures acknowledged in this study's limitations. Identity construction is visible in the way these narratives sustain a version of the self that participants need in order to keep going (Weick, 1995). Treating their accounts as completely transparent records of events would overlook the work participants performed through self-presentation and would weaken the reflexive stance this study claims.

Cross-theme Synthesis

Across the four themes, a coherent account of the phenomenon emerged in which anti-DEI hostility functioned as an ongoing institutional condition that participants had to read, carry, answer, and survive rather than as a series of isolated events. The analytic arc moved from structure to harm to strategy to meaning-making, mirroring the four nested rings of the conceptual framework as the analysis worked from the macro-societal evaluative ground of CRT inward through the organizational mechanisms of racialized organizations theory, the strategic

competencies of political astuteness, and the interpretive core of sensemaking. The relationship among the themes was not sequential in any simple sense, since participants were often living all four at once, reading caution, contradiction, and retreat in institutional behavior while simultaneously absorbing embodied cost, building strategic responses, and protecting a sense of self that the institution could not be allowed to define. The themes therefore fit together as interlocking dimensions of one experience rather than as separate stages of a linear process.

Theme One established the terrain within which everything else unfolded. Participants described institutions in which equity language had become politically charged, leadership support was often conditional, and the CDO role was expected to symbolize institutional commitment without receiving commensurate authority, staffing, or protection. The core pattern in that theme lay in the instability of support, with participants learning to read carefully what leadership would defend, what it would soften, and where public commitment would give way to private retreat. Those conditions did not remain external to the work, since Theme Two showed how they settled into participants' bodies, relationships, and moral lives, producing exhaustion that exceeded workload, betrayal that altered participants' relationship to their own values, and identity-based exposure that shaped who was doubted, scrutinized, protected, or left vulnerable. What Theme One made visible as structure, Theme Two revealed as embodied and relational cost.

Theme Three illustrated how participants responded to those conditions with resistant political praxis rather than with passive endurance. Coalition-building, persuasive calibration, and structural embeddedness formed a linked repertoire through which participants kept equity work moving inside institutions that were often ambivalent, constrained, or openly hostile. A clear patterned divergence emerged here. Some participants operated more through formal

structures, review cycles, dashboards, committee design, and governance architecture, while others relied more heavily on relational leverage, coalition, credibility, and translation where formal authority was thin. Those differences suggest that strategic response was calibrated to context rather than distributed evenly across participants. Even so, the underlying logic remained consistent, since participants refused disappearance, adjusted their routes, and worked to make equity harder to isolate, dismiss, or remove, even where, as noted above, the findings cannot fully establish whether the preserved work exceeded what the institution would have tolerated anyway.

Theme Four carried the analysis inward and forward, showing that strategy alone did not exhaust what anti-DEI hostility required of participants. They also had to protect themselves from depletion, remain legible to themselves when institutional readings became degrading or unstable, and decide whether the future still belonged inside the institutional arrangement that had already cost them so much. The strongest cross-case convergence in Theme Four lay in the refusal to let the institution author the final meaning of self, labor, or horizon. The strongest divergence lay in where participants still located possibility, with some imagining permanence, rebuilding, or relocated purpose, others holding onto guarded contingency, and Moto standing apart in profound disillusionment and radical redirection beyond the institutional form. Theme Four therefore extends the analysis by foregrounding the interpretive, moral, and future-oriented dimensions of participants' responses.

The four themes show that the phenomenon cannot be reduced to institutional retreat alone or to individual resilience alone. Anti-DEI hostility produced a racialized and politically charged condition in which participants had to read unstable environments, absorb displaced institutional cost, devise politically astute ways of preserving and advancing equity work, and

draw on identity, counter-narrative, and community to remain aligned with a sense of purpose larger than the institution's current capacity to support it. The clearest convergence across the sample appeared in strategic adaptation, embodied cost, coalition-building, and the need for sustaining forms of meaning-making. The clearest divergence appeared in participants' access to formal leverage, the degree of moral compromise they were required to absorb, and the futures they could still imagine with integrity. Ray's (2019) account of racialized organizations helps clarify why a single structural condition produced varied experiences across cases, since the institutional configurations participants moved through distributed authority, resources, and credibility unevenly before any individual response was possible, while Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality tenet helps clarify why those institutional conditions were lived differently depending on the convergence of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, role visibility, and other positional factors that shaped each participant's exposure. Those differences do not weaken the coherence of the findings; they deepen it by showing how the same structural condition was lived through different institutional configurations, identity positions, and levels of political authorization.

This coherence comes from a single vantage point, and I name that limitation here as an analytic boundary rather than leaving it only in the methods. This study encounters the institution through the eyes of CDOs. Students who lost a plainly named program, junior faculty who interpreted strategic discretion as silence, and staff excluded by confidentiality requirements might understand these same events as something other than preservation or resistance. Subira's account offers the study's clearest glimpse of that alternative vantage through the junior faculty of color who did not experience him as an ally. I treat their response as a genuine challenge to the leader's interpretation rather than simply another burden he had to absorb.

A CDO may understand a decision as protecting the work, while the people that work is intended to serve may experience the same decision as its quiet diminishment. The distance between those interpretations is more than a communication problem or background noise. It is a finding in its own right because it reveals that the meaning of resistance shifts according to where a person stands in relation to the decision, its consequences, and the power to define what was preserved.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that anti-DEI hostility reached far beyond external controversy or institutional rhetoric and entered the daily conditions of equity leadership as a force that shaped what participants could say, what they were expected to carry, how they had to move strategically, and what kinds of self-protection and meaning-making became necessary in order to remain in the work. Across the four themes, participants described institutions that often narrowed their commitments when equity became politically risky, leaders who absorbed contradiction into their bodies and relationships, strategic repertoires built under conditions of constraint, and sustaining forms of identity and hope that kept the institution from becoming the final authority on worth, purpose, or future. The findings therefore reveal equity leadership in this moment as politically discerning, emotionally demanding, strategically adaptive, and sustained by sources of conviction and selfhood that exceed the institution's own terms.

The chapter also shows that convergence and difference operated simultaneously across the sample. Participants shared a broad structural condition, though they inhabited and responded to it through distinct combinations of institutional context, positional authority, identity-based exposure, relational capital, and accumulated cost. Some had greater access to formal leverage, while others depended more heavily on relational or indirect forms of power. Some described

moral compromise and betrayal with unusual sharpness, while others had stronger opportunities to embed equity structurally or to hold onto guarded forms of hope. Those differences strengthen the findings because they show a recognizable pattern operating across varied institutional arrangements without reducing participants to a single flattened story.

Chapter Five turns from findings to interpretation and begins by summarizing the results and answering the central research question, then places the findings in conversation with the literature and interprets them through the study's conceptual framework. From there, it considers implications for practice and policy and future research and closes with a final reflection on what these findings contribute to ongoing conversations about equity leadership, institutional accountability, and the future of DEI work in higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter interprets the meaning, significance, and implications of the findings presented in Chapter Four. While Chapter Four centered the participants' lived experiences and meaning-making through IPA, this chapter considers what those findings reveal about equity leadership in higher education during a period of intensifying anti-DEI hostility. Across the four themes; Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility; Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal; Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness; and Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis, a coherent account of the phenomenon emerged. Together, these themes show that CDOs experienced anti-DEI hostility as a structural and ongoing condition, carried its effects in embodied and relational ways, responded through politically astute and adaptive forms of leadership, and sustained themselves through identity, purpose, and future-oriented meaning-making. Interpreted through the study's integrated conceptual framework of; critical race theory, the theory of racialized organizations, political astuteness theory, and sensemaking theory, the findings illuminate how participants made meaning of institutional ambiguity, navigated racialized organizational conditions, and crafted responses within institutions whose commitments to equity were often uneven, conditional, or politically constrained. This study was guided by one central research question:

Research Question

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

Summary of Findings

Chapter Four presented four interrelated themes grounded in the narratives of CDOs in New England, most of whom served in private, predominantly White institutions. This context shaped both the forms of institutional retreat participants encountered and the strategies they used to keep equity work alive. The first theme, *Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance: Navigating Anti-DEI Hostility*, captured the contradictory terrain participants navigated as they worked within environments marked by coded language, leadership retreat, anticipatory caution, and chronic under-resourcing. The second theme, *Embodied Racial Harm: Emotional Toll, Moral Injury, and Institutional Betrayal*, showed how anti-DEI hostility moved through organizational, emotional, relational, and bodily dimensions as participants described exhaustion, vigilance, grief, mistrust, and the cumulative burden of carrying equity work in institutions that did not always protect them. The third theme, *Resistant Political Praxis: Coalition-Building, Data, and Structural Embeddedness*, highlighted the strategic and politically attuned ways participants responded to these conditions. They built alliances, translated equity goals into institutionally legible language, paired data with human stories, and worked to embed equity into structures that could endure beyond shifting political moments. The fourth theme, *Counter-Narrative as Survival: Radical Hope, Identity, and Visionary Praxis*, illuminated the deeper sources of meaning that sustained participants as they drew on identity, ancestry, values, community, and future-oriented commitments to resist institutional diminishment and preserve a sense of purpose. Jointly, the four themes establish the foundation for answering the research question by showing how anti-DEI sentiment shaped participants' institutional conditions, interpretive labor, strategic responses, and sustaining sources of meaning.

Answering the Research Question

The findings show that CDOs encountered anti-DEI hostility as an institutional condition that narrowed what could be named, weakened what would be defended, and shifted risk onto the people charged with leading equity work. Across the four themes, participants described environments where they had to translate language, build coalitions, embed equity into institutional structures, and protect their own capacity to keep the work moving. They also carried exhaustion, betrayal, and identity-based exposure that exceeded ordinary professional strain. Experience, interpretation, and response operated as a continuing cycle and each new encounter with institutional conditions shaped how participants understood what equity leadership required and how they chose to act in those moments and onward.

How Chief Diversity Officers Experienced Anti-DEI Sentiment

Participants experienced anti-DEI sentiment as a pervasive condition of institutional precarity. Its daily texture included anticipatory retreat, politically charged language shifts, narrowed public commitment, and uneven access to power. Ulinzi described the preemptive renaming of her office in response to scrutiny, while Maji described a context in which “DEI as a tool” had been turned into “an ideological, political litmus test.” Together, their accounts show how anti-DEI hostility reorganized the terms of institutional legitimacy before any formal prohibition had to arrive. Interest convergence clarifies this pattern because institutional willingness to stand beside equity remained strongest when the work was reputationally manageable and weakened when leaders read the same work as politically exposing (Bell, 1992).

Participants also experienced anti-DEI sentiment through structural isolation and role compression. Roho described a unit so “beyond tiny” that she could not understand “how they think this work is gonna get done,” even as she was told to “not spend any money.” Mwerevu

described being reduced to “the DEI person” and placed “across the street” from decision makers, while Huruma named the same condition through the image of being “on an island.” Meaningful variation accompanied these convergences, Hewa, Maji, Mwerevu, and Moto described especially sharp experiences of being read through diminishment, containment, or stereotype. Ulinzi’s account sharpened the broader pattern by revealing how anti-DEI hostility could become especially acute when institutional vulnerability converged with fear for her own and her family’s physical safety as an Arab non-citizen. The concept of intersectionality helps make sense of this variation by showing how a shared structure of hostility was lived through distinct and differently intensified forms of risk (Crenshaw, 1989).

The most consequential dimension of participants’ experience was the embodied racial harm that anti-DEI hostility produced. Across cases, participants described moving through their roles with dread, armor, exhaustion, and moral strain, as institutional contradiction settled into their bodies, relationships, and sense of self. These accounts showed that the burden of equity leadership extended far beyond ordinary professional stress and instead took shape as a cumulative form of racialized and emotional injury. Moto’s reflection that his health had been impacted, alongside his recognition that some of what the work strained would not be restored, revealed the long arc of institutional extraction. Roho’s fear that any given day could bring cuts to her or her team showed how participants’ bodies learned to anticipate harm before a new decision had even been announced. Read together, these narratives indicate that participants were responding to patterned institutional conditions that repeatedly displaced the costs of organizational retreat onto those charged with carrying equity work forward, a pattern illuminated by CRT tenet of endemic racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

How Chief Diversity Officers Interpreted Anti-DEI Sentiment

Participants interpreted anti-DEI sentiment through continual sensemaking as they tried to determine what their institutions would defend, what they would dilute, and what they would leave equity leaders to absorb. Maji named this interpretive demand directly when she explained that ignoring context and the shifts happening internally and externally meant missing opportunities to shape one's own direction. Across cases, participants treated changes in language, shifts in tone, leadership silence, narrowed approval pathways, and the growing distance between public affirmation and material support as meaningful signals. These signals helped them assess institutional courage, institutional limits, and the likely costs of continuing the work. Their interpretations were therefore grounded in close attention to cues that often appeared indirect, partial, and unstable, a pattern illuminated by Weick's concept of extracted cues (Weick, 1995).

At the same time, participants did not interpret these conditions from identical institutional positions. A patterned distinction emerged between those with greater access to structural leverage and those whose influence depended more heavily on relational leverage. Maji, Subira, and Busara more often interpreted their institutions through governance processes, formal pathways, and opportunities to embed equity into durable structures. Roho, Mwerevu, Ardhi, Ulinzi, Moto, and Huruma more often interpreted their institutions through people, atmosphere, informal dynamics, and shifts in trust and credibility. These were not wholly separate ways of reading the institution, but they reflected different locations within it and different assessments of what could realistically be moved. Ray's theory of racialized organizations helps clarify this variation by showing how institutional position shapes access to authority, legitimacy, and actionable pathways for change (Ray, 2019).

Participants also interpreted exhaustion, mistrust, and identity-based injury as evidence about the institution itself and about the conditions under which equity work was being carried. Their bodies, relationships, and emotional responses became part of how they knew what the institution was doing. Several participants drew on resources beyond the institution to make sense of what they were encountering. Ardhi carried the memory of her grandmothers, who did not have access to higher education, as she reflected on how to expand the franchise. Roho returned to dignity, being seen, and being recognized as moral standards against which institutional retreat could be judged. These interpretive anchors gave participants a broader historical and ethical frame for understanding hostility, one that exceeded the institution's own language and allowed them to read their experiences within a longer struggle over belonging, recognition, and justice, a pattern clarified by Critical Race Theory's tenets of experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

How Chief Diversity Officers Responded While Advancing Equity Initiatives

Participants responded to anti-DEI sentiment through politically astute, relationally grounded, and structurally disciplined leadership. They adapted how they named the work, built coalitions that distributed responsibility and risk, embedded equity into institutional systems, and protected their own capacity to continue. These responses kept equity initiatives moving even as the political and institutional space around the work narrowed.

One form of response involved changing the language while trying to preserve the substance. Hewa explained that she could no longer say she was “using critical race theory” in the workplace, yet she continued to apply its principles through “policies and practices.” Maji similarly focused on “the work that isn’t outlawed.” Across cases, participants used coded language, rebranding, and strategic reframing to protect work that direct naming might place at

greater risk. The political astuteness domains of reading people and situations and sustaining strategic direction are visible in the way participants calibrated their language without surrendering the goals guiding their work (Hartley et al., 2015).

This adaptation carried an unresolved tension. Participants often understood preservation as resistance, yet quieter and less visible forms of equity work could also align with what institutions found easiest to tolerate. Interest convergence is visible in the possibility that institutions could support equity work once participants made it less costly, less publicly contentious, and safer for the institution's reputation (Bell, 1992). Speaking in code could therefore preserve a meaningful foothold for the CDO while also producing a version of equity that the institution preferred because it required less public commitment. The findings show the skill participants used to navigate this bind, although they cannot always establish whether the substance they preserved exceeded what their institutions would have supported anyway.

Participants also responded by building relationships that widened support, distributed risk, and carried the work farther than formal authority alone could. Ardhi described her practice through “the one on ones” and understood her role as closer to community organizing than formal administration. Roho named trusted allies as part of a strategy of “preservation as resistance,” while Mwerevu relied on informal networks, curiosity, and candor. Participants with greater structural leverage, including Maji, Subira, and Busara, also depended on alliances, although their authority allowed those relationships to take shape through committee structures, governance processes, and other durable forms of institutional participation. Coalition-building functioned as both a political strategy and a form of risk-sharing. It expanded who carried the work and reduced the extent to which equity depended on the CDO acting alone.

Participants pursued greater durability by baking equity into institutional systems so the work could survive personnel changes, public backlash, and shifting political conditions. Maji insisted that “I don’t do any work at all on my own” because work owned only by the CDO remained too easy to remove. Subira embedded equity into “decennial and midterm reviews,” while Busara moved people and programs into structures that were less vulnerable to soft funding and informal marginalization. These participants worked beyond visibility and toward infrastructure. They placed equity within policies, funding arrangements, review processes, governance structures, and shared responsibilities so that its continuation would depend less on one person’s presence or persuasive ability.

These accomplishments also complicate the language of precarity that organized Theme One. The leader who described herself as a “floating island” negotiated directly with her president for a director-level promotion and a new team. Participants who described leading an “office of one” also endowed offices, rewrote bylaws, redirected funding lines, and placed equity on board agendas. The CDOs in this study were under-resourced and structurally significant at the same time. They occupied the margins of some institutional spaces while exercising meaningful authority in others. Their ability to name constraint should therefore remain visible alongside the real, though uneven, leverage they exercised.

Response also required participants to protect their capacity to continue. Moto’s willingness at times to “let it burn,” Maji’s annual commitment to “preserve my peace,” and Busara’s deliberate cultivation of sustaining conditions beyond work show that participants understood boundary-setting as part of their leadership practice. They managed their visibility, redirected their energy, and refused to give the institution unrestricted access to their bodies, emotions, and sense of self. Enactment is visible in the way participants actively shaped the

conditions under which they could remain engaged rather than waiting for their institutions to create sustainable conditions for them (Weick, 1995).

Participants also imagined the future differently. Some continued building permanence within their institutions. Others remained while preparing for the possibility that the work, or their place within it, might need to change. A smaller number began redirecting their commitments toward forms of impact beyond institutional control. Across these differences, participants moved beyond direct advocacy toward an adaptive practice that combined strategic language, coalition-building, structural embedding, and self-protection. They continued advancing equity while refusing to allow the institution to hold complete authority over the meaning of their labor, the value of their identities, or the boundaries of their futures.

A further interpretive boundary concerns what these findings can establish about the effects of these strategies. I can assess the sophistication of participants' responses, the principles that grounded them, and the durability of the structures they created. The data do not allow me to determine whether those strategies materially improved conditions for the students, staff, and faculty the work was intended to serve. Embedding equity into a decennial review or moving a position onto a permanent funding line made the work harder to remove, but those actions do not by themselves establish that marginalized members of the community experienced meaningful change.

This distinction matters because racialized decoupling occurs when formal commitments and institutional structures remain separated from everyday practice and lived outcomes (Ray, 2019). The embeddedness strategies participants described could help close that distance, or they could place the same gap inside structures that were more durable. What these findings establish with confidence is that participants' strategies preserved purposeful agency, expanded

institutional footholds, and often strengthened their capacity to continue. Whether those strategies also sustained the communities they sought to serve remains an important question that this study raises but cannot answer.

Discussion

The four themes developed in Chapter Four brought the findings and analysis together into an integrated account of how anti-DEI hostility reached CDOs through public backlash, institutional caution, coded language, uneven protection, and the transfer of political and emotional burden onto equity leaders themselves. This discussion interprets the broader significance of those findings through the literature and the study's conceptual framework, showing how CDO leadership in this moment is shaped by racialized institutional power, strategic agency, embodied sensemaking, and the ongoing effort to preserve equity work under constraint.

Findings in Conversation with the Literature

This study contributes to scholarship on equity leadership by showing how anti-DEI retrenchment is carried through the everyday interpretive, relational, strategic, and embodied labor of CDOs. Chapter Two organized the relevant scholarship around four interrelated areas. These areas included the organizational positioning and authority of the CDO role, the institutional conditions shaping equity leadership, the strategic and relational responses developed under political pressure, and the consequences and sustaining practices associated with retrenchment. The findings affirm many of the structural challenges identified in this literature while bringing them closer to lived experience. They show how institutional arrangements, leadership behavior, political pressure, and organizational rhetoric became conditions that participants continually interpreted, negotiated, and carried.

The findings also extend the literature by demonstrating that anti-DEI retrenchment reached CDOs through more than formal legislation or the elimination of offices. It operated through altered vocabulary, ambiguous signals, reporting relationships, silence, anticipated threats, interpersonal betrayal, and decisions about when and how equity work could remain visible. Participants interpreted these conditions while preserving relationships, supporting campus communities, and protecting their own sense of purpose. The discussion that follows places these findings in conversation with the major strands of scholarship reviewed in Chapter Two and identifies the study's contributions to the field.

Organizational Positioning and Structural Commitment

The literature on CDO authority and organizational positioning provides one of the clearest points of convergence with the findings. Existing studies show that CDO effectiveness is shaped by reporting relationships, access to senior leaders, decision-making authority, staffing, budgets, and integration into institutional governance (Gravley-Stack et al., 2016; Harvey, 2014; Leon, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014). Other scholarship demonstrates that equity leaders may occupy senior positions while continuing to experience racialized scrutiny, restricted authority, and professional vulnerability (Koffi, 2024; Ueda et al., 2024).

Theme One, particularly Subtheme 1c, An Office of One, a Voice Unheard, strongly supports this literature. Mwerevu described himself as positioned “across the street” and as “an island,” physically and organizationally separated from the location where institutional decisions were made. Ulinzi described a reporting relationship that shifted from the president to a vice president as political pressure intensified. Huruma described limited authority to pursue systemic change, minimal access to her supervisor, and prolonged silence from human resources. Roho

described an office that received verbal affirmation while remaining structurally small and under-resourced.

These accounts show that organizational marginalization was experienced through concrete arrangements and daily institutional interactions. Office location, reporting lines, meeting access, supervisory communication, and the allocation of staff became signals through which participants assessed the legitimacy and reach of their roles. Participants read institutional silence as carefully as formal decisions because both communicated the boundaries of their influence.

The findings also complicate the assumption that stronger formal positioning consistently produces greater institutional influence. Participants with limited access and authority experienced acute forms of marginalization. Participants with greater structural leverage also encountered institutional retreat when supporting equity became politically costly. Formal position created opportunities for influence, yet sustained institutional backing depended on the willingness of senior leaders to share responsibility and accept the political consequences of equity commitments. This finding supports scholarship that locates CDO effectiveness within broader systems of shared responsibility, governance, and leadership accountability (Holcombe et al., 2025; Liera & Desir, 2023; Stanley et al., 2019; Worthington et al., 2014).

The findings further deepen scholarship on the gap between public diversity commitments and material institutional support. Wilton et al. (2020) describe diversity dishonesty as the harm that occurs when organizational representations of diversity exceed the experiences and conditions encountered by members of historically marginalized groups. Theme One reveals how CDOs experienced this divergence from within the institutional structure responsible for producing and communicating equity commitments.

Subtheme 1b, The Bosses' Double Talk and Their Fearful Retreat, captures this contradiction. Roho described an institution where neutrality became an operating expectation and explicit equity language received increasing scrutiny. Moto described a president whose public support shifted toward silence and retreat, producing what he called "internal treason." Ardhi described pressure to "dampen both our visibility and the fervor" of established programs. Huruma described community members interpreting an office rename as evidence that the institution was "complying in advance." Hewa described leaders contracting around imagined threats and relinquishing lawful work because accusation had acquired the force of a verdict.

These accounts show that institutional support was frequently shaped by utility, reputation, political comfort, and risk management. Institutions retained the symbolic benefits associated with equity commitments while narrowing the visibility, language, and reach of the work as external pressure intensified. The findings therefore support the literature on symbolic commitment while extending it through the standpoint of the leaders required to maintain public confidence in institutional values during periods of retreat. The gap between rhetoric and structure became a lived ethical contradiction that participants had to interpret and manage.

Anti-DEI Retrenchment and Strategic Adaptation

The findings also converge with contemporary research on the political and legal pressures surrounding DEI in higher education. Scholarship documents the growth of legislative restrictions, executive directives, enforcement threats, and political campaigns that frame equity initiatives as discriminatory or ideologically suspect (Follmer et al., 2024; Harper, 2025). Studies of faculty experiences further show that political uncertainty can produce self-censorship, altered language, and caution in teaching, research, and professional expression (Dhanani et al., 2024; Goldberg, 2024; Pedota et al., 2025).

Subtheme 1a, Speaking in Code to Keep the Work Alive, supports and extends this scholarship. Hewa described bringing critical race theory into every meeting while withholding its formal name. Roho described “community” becoming a code word for belonging as explicit racial language became more difficult to use. Moto identified “immigration” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion” as professionally dangerous terms. Busara described asking how the work could be rebranded and which language might “raise eyebrows.” Subira described moving sensitive conversations away from institutional email.

The findings show that retrenchment created a changed communicative environment in which vocabulary, platform, audience, and timing carried political significance. Participants continually assessed what could be said, how directly it could be said, where it could be recorded, and who could safely receive it. The chilling effect documented in broader studies therefore became an ongoing form of interpretive labor for CDOs. Language functioned as a site of risk assessment, organizational reading, and strategic decision-making.

The findings further align with Grim et al.’s (2025) typology of strategic inaction, strategic proaction, and strategic reaction. Participants described pausing visible initiatives, revising language, moving work into less politicized structures, strengthening assessment systems, and building institutional supports before external actors required a response. Their actions often combined more than one part of the typology.

Maji described her institution as “choosing to have agency in the process and not wait to be told.” Subira pursued what she called “the safer route” by embedding equity within review cycles and professional competencies. Huruma reassured colleagues that the institution was “staying true” while “doing it in a safer way.” Busara described a “gently bold” strategy that

preserved equity work under alternative language and institutional arrangements. These strategies reflected anticipatory interpretation as much as formal compliance.

The regional setting strengthens this contribution. Participants worked in New England institutions located outside the states most closely associated with formal anti-DEI legislation. They nevertheless described anticipatory retreat, changes in language, restructuring, and heightened institutional caution. The findings show that political retrenchment travels through national discourse, governing-board concerns, donor expectations, legal interpretation, and reputational anxiety. Formal legislation represents one pathway through which anti-DEI pressure reaches institutions. Anticipatory governance represents another.

This finding extends the literature by demonstrating how institutions may reproduce the practical effects of formal restrictions through voluntary or preemptive actions. CDOs were then required to interpret whether these changes represented protection, recalibration, symbolic compliance, or institutional withdrawal. The meaning of rebranding or restructuring depended on the purpose behind the change, the resources preserved, and the accountability structures that remained.

Casellas Connors and McCoy (2022) demonstrate how institutions may communicate antiracist commitments while preserving existing organizational arrangements. The present findings show a related tension in the opposite direction. Institutions sometimes reduced the visibility of equity language while attempting to preserve selected practices. These outward changes carried varied meanings. In some cases, revised language created room for the work to continue. In others, revised language marked a reduction in authority, clarity, or institutional courage.

The findings therefore refine the literature by showing that rebranding and structural adaptation carry no fixed equity meaning. Their significance emerges from institutional intent, resource allocation, governance authority, and participants' interpretations of the surrounding context. CDOs judged whether an adaptation created protective cover for equity work or facilitated its gradual containment. This interpretive responsibility formed a central part of their leadership practice.

Embodied Harm, Betrayal, and Campus Climate

The emotional and embodied findings engage scholarship on the labor and vulnerability associated with equity leadership. Studies of DEI leaders document expansive responsibilities, restricted authority, emotional labor, burnout, and the pressure to support institutional communities while managing personal exposure to the same conditions they are expected to address (Esparza et al., 2024; Hogan et al., 2023; Ueda et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2a, *Moving Through Molasses*, gives this scholarship an embodied account. Moto described a body that had “broke down” across years of accumulated strain. Roho described a mind that continued rehearsing questions of legitimacy and voice, along with a body that carried institutional anxiety into vacation. Ulinzi described panic responses during heightened conflict and the repeated effort to “feed a depleted soul.” Maji named burnout and established an annual intention to “preserve her peace.” Huruma described carrying anxiety and panic disorder through work that repeatedly heightened the stakes of inclusion and exclusion.

These findings show that the burden of equity leadership grew through organizational contradiction as well as workload. Participants encountered institutions that publicly affirmed equity while isolating, containing, or under-resourcing the people responsible for advancing it. Their bodies carried the accumulated consequences of navigating these contradictions.

Exhaustion developed through repeated interpretation, emotional containment, relationship management, vigilance, and exposure to institutional retreat.

Subtheme 2b, Internal Treason and the Sting of Betrayal, extends this contribution beyond burnout. Roho used the word “traitorous” to describe withholding information from staff who trusted her. Moto characterized leadership retreat as “internal treason.” Huruma described being “done dirty.” Mwerevu described the cumulative experience of having his expertise managed instead of sought.

These accounts suggest that betrayal provides an important concept for understanding the emotional consequences of equity leadership. Participants experienced distress when institutional leaders reversed commitments, withheld support, shifted responsibility, or required CDOs to communicate decisions that conflicted with their professional values. These experiences threatened participants’ trust in their institutions and their sense of themselves as ethical leaders.

Petriglieri’s (2011) work on identity threat offers one lens for interpreting these findings. Institutional conditions can threaten identities that individuals understand as central to their sense of self and professional integrity. Participants’ accounts demonstrate how such threats emerged when their roles required them to reconcile institutional expectations with their commitments to honesty, justice, community care, and professional responsibility. The harm involved fatigue and a struggle to preserve coherence under contradictory expectations.

The findings also deepen research on campus climate by locating CDOs within the climate they are expected to assess and improve. Research on anti-DEI restrictions shows that political and institutional uncertainty can alter professional expression, reduce trust, and create uneven burdens for historically marginalized faculty and staff (Dhanani et al., 2024; Goldberg,

2024; Nuñez-Janes et al., 2025; Pedota et al., 2025). Participants in this study absorbed these conditions from several directions.

Roho described holding confidential information while remaining accountable to staff who trusted her. Huruma undertook a listening tour following an office name change because institutional communication left community members uncertain about what the change represented. Moto described students telling him they would have struggled to reach graduation without his support. Institutional retreat therefore entered relationships, well-being, belonging, and student persistence.

These accounts position CDOs as highly exposed participants in campus climate. They received community concerns, interpreted senior leadership decisions, absorbed institutional ambiguity, and managed their own identities within the same environment. Their roles placed them at the intersection of institutional power and community harm. The findings extend campus climate scholarship by demonstrating that CDOs carry the climate from several organizational positions at once.

Coalitions, Shared Responsibility, and Protective Architecture

Theme Three aligns with scholarship on shared equity leadership and structural embedding. Research emphasizes that equity work becomes more durable when responsibility extends across leaders, units, governance bodies, and institutional systems while retaining coordination and accountability (Espino & Ariza, 2022; Holcombe et al., 2025; Laursen & Austin, 2020; Stanley et al., 2019). Shared responsibility creates institutional reach when it includes clear decision rights, resources, formal expectations, and mechanisms for assessing progress.

Maji described a practice in which each initiative had a co-owner and the DEI board committee included cross-committee representation in its bylaws. Busara described moving equity-committed staff from temporary grant funding into institutional positions while incorporating equity into the strategic plan, governance structures, and hiring tools. Subira described a governance dashboard aligned with NADOHE standards that brought equity accountability before the Board of Trustees three times each year and incorporated equity into departmental review. Huruma transformed her anger into a Community and Belonging Fellows program and accessible design features that became part of the physical environment. Ardhi created tools and processes that distributed knowledge and responsibility so the work could endure beyond her tenure. Ulinzi used mission and values language to build coalitions around a vocabulary that retained institutional legitimacy.

These findings show that coalition building and structural embedding served as protective architecture. Participants developed structures that widened ownership, distributed political risk, created recurring accountability, and placed equity work within systems that were more difficult to eliminate through a single decision. Coalition building therefore functioned as a strategy for both change and institutional survival.

The findings also sharpen the distinction between shared responsibility and diffused responsibility. Shared responsibility connected named individuals and units to defined obligations, reporting systems, and institutional authority. Diffused responsibility dispersed equity work without clear ownership or accountability. The first arrangement increased durability. The second allowed institutions to claim broad commitment while leaving implementation dependent on voluntary labor and personal goodwill.

Faculty and staff allyship formed part of this protective architecture. Research shows that resistance to DEI often grows from perceived threats to status, identity, resources, or established definitions of merit and fairness (Gündemir et al., 2024; Iyer, 2022). Participants encountered these forms of resistance through senior leadership retreat, faculty opposition, procedural delay, and appeals to neutrality. They responded by cultivating relationships with people who could carry equity commitments into hiring, curriculum, governance, assessment, and student support.

Scholarship on faculty allyship emphasizes that effective allyship requires sustained action, accountability, and the use of institutional influence (Hanasono et al., 2022; Ro et al., 2023). The findings reinforce this principle. Allyship became durable when participants translated it into bylaws, dashboards, review processes, hiring tools, funded positions, and shared decision-making structures. Allyship remained fragile when it depended primarily on the comfort or goodwill of an individual leader.

The findings therefore extend coalition and allyship scholarship by showing how CDOs converted relationships into organizational infrastructure. Their work involved identifying potential partners, reading their willingness and influence, matching responsibilities to institutional roles, and creating systems that carried equity commitments beyond interpersonal support.

Counter stories, Identity Work, and Critical Hope

Theme Four brings the literature on counter stories, leadership identity, and critical hope into direct conversation with participants' sustaining practices. Critical race scholarship positions counter storytelling as a way to center knowledge excluded by dominant institutional narratives and to reveal the structural conditions that official accounts frequently obscure (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Leadership scholarship further shows how people working from marginalized

positions construct identities that connect personal histories, institutional roles, and commitments to change (Chunoo & Torres, 2023; Montevirgen, 2011; Petriglieri, 2011).

Participants' accounts functioned as counter stories by challenging institutional narratives of neutrality, progress, and steady commitment. They named retreat, betrayal, fear, coded language, and structural isolation. They also connected their leadership to lineage, faith, family, cultural identity, community, and liberation. These narratives preserved forms of knowledge that institutional reports, strategic plans, and public statements rarely capture.

Roho drew on faith, Black feminist grounding, and a horizon of liberation. Maji treated peace as a practice requiring active protection. Ulinzi described therapy, energy work, massage, and “girl dinners” as recurring efforts to sustain a depleted inner life. Ardhi carried her grandmothers into a building they had once been prohibited from entering and made their presence part of her reason for continuing. Busara described becoming unapologetic about her bilingual immigrant identity. Subira carried forward the teaching that one remains free from the obligation to complete the work while remaining responsible for contributing to it. Moto rejected the role of “DEI Jesus” and redirected his calling toward forms of impact that extended beyond the institution. Huruma drew on her father’s guidance to remain prepared to pivot and transformed that readiness into freedom.

These practices shaped how participants understood themselves and their available choices. They influenced when participants spoke, stayed, withdrew, redirected their labor, set boundaries, or prepared to leave. Identity work therefore functioned as a form of leadership practice. Participants drew on their histories and communities to preserve coherence under institutional conditions that threatened to fragment their professional and personal identities.

Critical hope provides another lens for interpreting these accounts. Critical hope acknowledges material conditions, suffering, and structural constraint while sustaining collective possibility and purposeful action (Bishundat et al., 2018; Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Participants' hope carried this grounded quality. It included grief, anger, boundary setting, preparation, and awareness of institutional limitations. It supported action while leaving room for departure, redirection, and self-preservation.

The findings extend the critical hope literature by showing that hope operated as an interpretive resource. It shaped how participants evaluated their institutions, understood their responsibilities, imagined future possibilities, and decided which forms of engagement remained sustainable. Hope worked alongside counter storytelling and identity work as one interconnected repertoire grounded in lineage, faith, community, culture, and political clarity.

These sustaining narratives also protected participants' sense of self. Participants frequently positioned themselves as clear-eyed advocates working within institutions characterized by fear, contradiction, or compromised commitments. These accounts can be understood as situated self-presentations constructed within interviews with a researcher who shared aspects of their professional world. Through this interpretive process, participants described events while also constructing a usable sense of themselves as ethical leaders under pressure.

This reflexive interpretation strengthens the analysis by recognizing the interviews as sites of meaning-making. Participants selected experiences, language, metaphors, and identities that helped organize complex institutional conditions. Their accounts therefore reveal both what they experienced and how they made those experiences intelligible to themselves and to the researcher (Weick, 1995).

Contributions to the Literature

The findings make five primary contributions to scholarship on equity leadership in higher education.

First, anti-DEI retrenchment operated through the everyday interpretive labor of CDOs. Broad organizational dynamics such as symbolic commitment, political retreat, structural marginalization, and strategic adaptation became daily decisions about speech, trust, relationships, visibility, and professional risk.

Second, retrenchment emerged in New England through anticipatory institutional behavior even in the absence of formal state mandates. This finding extends Grim et al.'s (2025) typology by demonstrating how strategic inaction, strategic proaction, and strategic reaction can develop in institutions responding to perceived threats, national political discourse, and anticipated scrutiny.

Third, institutional contradiction produced embodied, relational, and identity-based consequences. Exhaustion accumulated through workload and through repeated encounters with institutions that named equity as a value while treating equity leadership as containable, expendable, or politically inconvenient. Betrayal and ethical conflict provide important concepts for understanding this dimension of the role.

Fourth, coalition building and structural embedding functioned as protective architecture. Participants converted relationships and commitments into bylaws, dashboards, review systems, funded positions, strategic plans, hiring practices, and physical environments. These structures distributed risk, widened ownership, and created institutional footholds that could endure leadership turnover and political change.

Finally, counter stories, identity work, and critical hope functioned as an integrated repertoire for sustaining equity leadership. These practices shaped how participants interpreted events, preserved professional coherence, established boundaries, persisted, redirected their labor, and imagined futures beyond the immediate institution.

Together, these contributions make the literature more concrete, relational, embodied, and accountable to the lived realities of CDOs. They show that equity leadership under anti-DEI pressure involves more than implementing programs or responding to policy. It requires continual interpretation of organizational signals, negotiation of racialized power, strategic use of language and relationships, and sustained work to preserve a coherent sense of self. These contributions establish the foundation for the theoretical refinement developed in the next section through the study's integrated conceptual framework.

Findings Through the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework explains CDO leadership under anti-DEI conditions through four interconnected layers. Critical race theory provides the societal and historical layer by locating participants' experiences within enduring structures of racism and the racialized history of higher education (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The theory of racialized organizations provides the organizational layer by explaining how institutional rules, resources, meanings, and distributions of agency reproduce racial hierarchy within formally race-neutral environments (Ray, 2019). Sensemaking and critical sensemaking provide the interpretive layer by explaining how participants extracted cues, constructed plausible understandings, and interpreted institutional change within contexts shaped by power, identity, discourse, and organizational history (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). Political astuteness theory provides the strategic

leadership layer by illuminating how participants read people and situations, built alignment, cultivated alliances, and pursued strategic direction within politically contested institutions (Hartley & Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al., 2015, 2019).

Each framework illuminates a distinct aspect of the same phenomenon. Critical race theory identifies the racial structures and ideological conditions surrounding anti-DEI sentiment. The theory of racialized organizations shows how those conditions are reproduced through institutional arrangements. Sensemaking and critical sensemaking explain how participants interpreted changing conditions while accounting for the influence of power and identity on what became visible, credible, and actionable. Political astuteness theory explains how participants translated those interpretations into relational and strategic action. Intersectionality operates within the critical race theory layer by maintaining attention to the ways race, gender, citizenship, sexuality, professional history, and institutional position shaped participants' experiences of shared organizational conditions in distinct ways (Crenshaw, 1989). Together, the frameworks reveal CDO leadership as racialized, organizational, strategic, relational, embodied, and interpretive work.

Critical Race Theory and the Conditionality of Institutional Commitment

Critical race theory carried the broadest historical and evaluative weight in the analysis. It situated participants' experiences within enduring patterns of racial hierarchy and clarified how appeals to neutrality, merit, institutional reputation, and procedural caution could preserve established interests while narrowing equity work. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) explain that CRT in education requires attention to the material, structural, and ideological mechanisms through which White supremacy is reproduced. Patton (2016) extends this analysis directly into postsecondary education, arguing that colleges and universities participate in racial reproduction

through the ordinary policies, practices, language, and assumptions that constitute institutional life.

This higher education focus was important for interpreting participants' experiences. Anti-DEI pressures did not arrive only through extraordinary political events. They moved through routine decisions concerning budgets, reporting relationships, office names, meeting access, communication, leadership style, curriculum, and professional legitimacy. Patton's (2016) analysis of the ordinary "prose" of postsecondary institutions helps explain how these seemingly routine practices carried racial consequences even when leaders presented them as administrative, procedural, or politically neutral.

Bell's (1992) concept of interest convergence was especially useful for interpreting the conditional nature of institutional support. Participants described institutions that embraced equity when the work aligned with enrollment priorities, accreditation expectations, employee recruitment, student retention, public reputation, or institutional branding. Support weakened when equity initiatives appeared to threaten funding, donor confidence, trustee comfort, political relationships, or regulatory standing. Equity remained institutionally desirable while it generated recognizable benefits and manageable political costs.

The findings extend interest convergence by showing how conditional support became visible through everyday decisions. Reporting lines shifted. Leaders withdrew from public advocacy. Programs were renamed. Equity language received heightened scrutiny. Offices remained understaffed while their responsibilities expanded. Participants interpreted these developments as evidence that institutional commitment rested on changing calculations of benefit, exposure, and risk.

The findings also suggest a form of anticipatory interest convergence. Several institutions recalibrated their equity commitments before legislation, litigation, or enforcement required change. Leaders responded to projected donor reactions, anticipated trustee concerns, possible political scrutiny, and imagined funding threats. Institutional interest therefore operated through present benefits and anticipated future exposure. Participants experienced the resulting changes as institutional retreat in advance of a formal mandate.

The endemic and structural nature of racism also helped explain why under-resourcing, selective protection, racialized scrutiny, and leadership retreat appeared across institutions as recurring patterns rather than isolated failures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Participants encountered these patterns through routine systems involving budgets, supervision, communication, hiring, authority, and access. Ledesma and Calderón's (2015) account of CRT in education reinforces the importance of examining these structural and ideological mechanisms rather than limiting racial analysis to explicitly discriminatory acts.

Patton (2016) further clarifies why institutional neutrality deserves critical examination. Postsecondary institutions often present established practices as objective, traditional, or universally applicable even when those practices developed within and continue to reproduce racial hierarchy. Participants' accounts of being encouraged to soften equity language, avoid naming race, or present structural inequity through generalized language illustrate how institutional neutrality became an active racial position.

Intersectionality sharpened this analysis by showing how participants occupied the CDO role through different configurations of identity and institutional power (Crenshaw, 1989). Hewa's encounters with racialized and masculine-coded expectations of executive presence differed from the pressures experienced by participants whose citizenship histories, language,

gender, professional backgrounds, or institutional locations shaped how others received their authority. Participants navigated a shared political environment through different relationships to race, gender, nationality, organizational power, and institutional legitimacy.

Counter storytelling held particular importance in Theme Four. Participants drew on ancestry, spirituality, cultural knowledge, family history, community memory, and moral conviction to challenge institutional narratives of neutrality and steady progress (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their accounts made visible the costs of equity work, the conditionality of institutional support, and the interior labor required to sustain both the work and the self.

The findings extend counter storytelling beyond its function as discursive challenge. Counter stories also operated as survival infrastructure. Participants used stories of ancestors, communities, family members, and historical struggle to sustain purpose, interpret harm, set boundaries, and imagine futures beyond immediate institutional conditions. These narratives helped participants contest institutional accounts while preserving authority over the meaning of their own experiences.

Racialized Organizations and the Institutional Production of Constraint

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations brought the structural insights of CRT into the daily arrangements of institutional life. The theory explains how organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, legitimate unequal distributions of resources, treat whiteness as a credential, and decouple formal rules from racialized organizational practice.

Racial decoupling was visible throughout the findings. Institutions maintained public commitments to equity while narrowing the authority, visibility, or reach of equity work. Mission statements, strategic plans, and public communication continued to signal inclusion while leaders

exercised greater caution in staffing, programming, language, and advocacy. Formal commitment and daily organizational practice moved along different paths.

Participants experienced this decoupling through the gap between what institutions said and what they materially supported. Roho's office received verbal affirmation while remaining structurally small. Huruma carried responsibility for systemic change with limited authority and supervisory access. Moto witnessed public support give way to leadership silence. Hewa observed leaders relinquishing lawful work in response to anticipated accusation. These accounts show how racial decoupling entered CDO work through resources, communication, reporting structures, and leadership behavior.

Ray's (2019) proposition that organizations legitimate unequal distributions of resources and agency also clarified the office-of-one pattern. Institutions drew on CDO labor at the scale of institutional need while providing resources at the scale of institutional tolerance. Participants were expected to address campus climate, student belonging, employee development, policy, recruitment, retention, crisis response, compliance, and organizational change with limited staff, budgets, and formal authority.

Unequal agency extended beyond material resources. Participants' ability to define problems, establish priorities, access decision makers, communicate with campus communities, and influence policy varied considerably. Institutions could hold CDOs responsible for institutional outcomes while retaining control of the systems producing those outcomes elsewhere. This arrangement concentrated responsibility and exposure in the CDO role while preserving organizational authority in other units.

Whiteness as credential helped explain how credibility and leadership authority were unevenly assigned (Ray, 2019). Hewa's experience of being judged against a White masculine

model of executive presence illustrated how organizational expectations concerning confidence, tone, appearance, and leadership style shaped perceptions of authority. Subira's account of conditional racial palatability similarly showed that acceptance depended partly on whether a leader's communication and presence remained within boundaries others found comfortable.

Read through intersectionality, these findings show that whiteness as credential interacted with gendered and culturally specific expectations of leadership (Crenshaw, 1989; Ray, 2019). Participants' knowledge could receive formal recognition while their embodiment remained subject to scrutiny. Their authority therefore depended on title and expertise as well as the racialized meanings attached to demeanor, directness, emotion, language, and professional style.

Ulinzi's experience offers an important refinement to the theory of racialized organizations. During a period of heightened vulnerability, her vice president instructed her to step away from public exposure and assumed responsibility for managing institutional risk. This decision redirected danger upward rather than allowing it to settle onto the CDO. The episode demonstrates that institutional choices reproduce racialized organizational patterns and that deliberate choices concerning protection, authority, and responsibility can interrupt their immediate operation.

The study also extends Ray's (2019) framework by examining how the CDO role can become part of racial decoupling. A visible and professionally staffed diversity office can serve as evidence of institutional commitment while wider organizational systems remain unchanged. The institution can draw reputational value from the presence and labor of the CDO while postponing more disruptive changes to governance, authority, curriculum, hiring, evaluation, and resource distribution.

The CDO can therefore become an involuntary mechanism of racial decoupling. The leader's competence and visibility may provide institutional cover for a commitment the organization has enacted only partially. Participants actively worked against this possibility. Maji distributed ownership across leaders and units. Mwerevu rejected symbolic rearrangements. Subira connected equity commitments to governance dashboards and recurring review. Busara moved programs and positions into durable institutional structures. These strategies attempted to convert representational commitment into shared structural responsibility.

This contribution complicates an account that positions CDOs only as challengers to racialized organizational processes. Participants challenged these processes while working within institutions capable of absorbing oppositional labor and converting it into reputational value. Their awareness of this possibility shaped their efforts to build accountability, distribute responsibility, and embed equity beyond a single office.

Sensemaking and the Interpretation of Institutional Change

Sensemaking theory illuminated the continuous interpretive labor connecting participants' experiences and strategic responses. Participants repeatedly asked what was happening, what institutional behavior meant, who could be trusted, and which responses remained possible. Their sensemaking was identity-based, retrospective, social, ongoing, cue-driven, enactive, and oriented toward plausible action (Weick, 1995).

Critical sensemaking deepens this account by recognizing that meaning-making occurs within institutional contexts shaped by power, discourse, identity, organizational rules, and historical relationships (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Participants did not interpret neutral or equally available information. They interpreted cues produced within racialized organizations where

leaders controlled information, institutional narratives shaped what could be said, and participants' identities affected whose interpretations were treated as credible.

Identity construction shaped how participants understood institutional events. Their senses of themselves as equity leaders, educators, advocates, caregivers, and community members influenced which actions became meaningful and which compromises became ethically difficult. Institutional retreat carried particular force when it threatened identities and commitments participants understood as central to their professional integrity.

Helms Mills et al. (2010) help explain why identity construction was linked to power. Participants' identities were shaped through personal history and through organizational expectations concerning what a legitimate leader should sound like, look like, prioritize, and tolerate. Hewa's encounters with executive-presence expectations and Subira's reflections on racial palatability show that identity construction occurred within institutional discourses that privileged some performances of leadership over others.

Theme Four illustrates how participants drew on interpretive resources beyond their institutions. Faith, family history, ancestry, culture, mentorship, and community helped them preserve a workable sense of self. These resources allowed participants to interpret institutional experiences through histories and commitments that exceeded the organization's authority.

Retrospective sensemaking appeared when participants revisited earlier experiences in light of later developments (Weick, 1995). Moto's interpretation of presidential silence transformed his understanding of earlier expressions of support. Mwerevu's conclusion that leadership was nobody's ally emerged through an accumulation of experiences rather than a single event. New instances of retreat, contradiction, or silence changed the meaning of what had come before.

Critical sensemaking clarifies that these reinterpretations were connected to institutional power because leaderships' silence, communication, reporting decisions, and public language helped determine which accounts of institutional events became official and which remained private or contested (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Participants frequently had to interpret the gap between official institutional narratives and the meanings produced through their own experiences.

This cumulative reinterpretation produced a form of moral rupture because participants reassessed previous relationships, commitments, and periods of professional life through evidence that institutional support had been more conditional than they once understood. Their distress involved present conditions and a reorganization of their understanding of the past.

Sensemaking was also social. Participants relied on staff, students, trusted colleagues, professional peers, family members, and community networks to interpret ambiguous events. Conversations helped them test interpretations, recognize patterns, and assess institutional risk. Critical sensemaking adds that these conversations sometimes occurred outside formal institutional channels because official communication systems felt monitored, constrained, or politically unsafe (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

Cue extraction was central to this process. Participants read explicit policies and subtle signals. Reporting changes, delayed communication, renamed offices, altered meeting access, leadership silence, donor concerns, trustee questions, and shifts in vocabulary all became cues. They also read their own physical and emotional responses.

Ardhi recognized that the work had quadrupled in weight even when the volume of tasks remained similar. Roho carried anxiety into vacation and repeatedly wondered whether her team would be eliminated. Moto described the breakdown of his body across years of strain. Ulinzi

experienced panic during periods of conflict. Participants' bodies registered organizational conditions that official communication often left unnamed.

The findings extend sensemaking and critical sensemaking by identifying embodied cue extraction as a significant dimension of institutional interpretation. Exhaustion, anxiety, dread, vigilance, and physical depletion operated as forms of knowledge. Participants interpreted bodily responses alongside policies, relationships, institutional discourse, and organizational events. The body became part of the sensemaking process through which institutional power was known.

Enactment was equally important, as participants shaped the environments they were interpreting (Weick, 1995). Hewa embedded equity across strategic priorities, while Maji established shared ownership. Subira moved equity into governance and review structures, while Busara placed people and programs into more durable institutional locations, and Huruma transformed anger into programming and accessible design. These actions altered the organizational conditions available for future interpretation and action.

Critical sensemaking adds that enactment was constrained by power (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Participants could shape local structures, relationships, and language, while senior leaders, boards, donors, and external actors controlled other dimensions of the environment. Their agency was therefore real and bounded. They enacted institutional possibilities within systems that distributed authority unevenly.

Plausibility also shaped participants' decisions, as they frequently worked without complete information about legal developments, donor influence, leadership intentions, or future enforcement. Action depended on interpretations that were sufficiently credible to guide a response rather than on certainty (Weick, 1995). Critical sensemaking further asks whose

interpretation became institutionally plausible and whose interpretation was dismissed, minimized, or treated as politically inconvenient (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

The findings therefore position CDO leadership as power-laden sensemaking in motion. Interpretation and action developed together. Participants interpreted racialized institutional conditions through their responses, and their responses generated new arrangements, relationships, and meanings requiring further interpretation.

Political Astuteness, Public Value, and Racialized Strategic Leadership

Political astuteness theory helped explain how participants exercised agency within contested organizational conditions. Hartley and colleagues identify five interconnected domains of political astuteness. These include personal skills, interpersonal skills, reading people and situations, building alignment and alliances, and strategic direction and scanning (Hartley et al., 2015). Each domain appeared across participants' accounts.

Personal skills were visible in participants' self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, and ability to maintain purpose during conflict. Subira demonstrated composure and disciplined focus during a week marked by institutional threats. Maji treated the preservation of peace as a leadership practice. Huruma drew on her father's guidance to remain prepared to pivot. These practices preserved participants' capacity for judgment and action.

Interpersonal skills appeared through listening, negotiation, communication, and relationship maintenance. Ardhi's interest-based negotiation approach combined preparation with sustained attention to relationships. Maji calibrated her communication to the person across the table. Ulinzi used mission and values language to create a vocabulary through which colleagues could continue engaging equity concerns. Participants treated communication as a political and relational practice shaped by audience, history, trust, and institutional position.

Reading people and situations was central to participants' work. Ardhi used individual conversations to understand interests and build support. Roho differentiated among reliable allies, situational supporters, and colleagues whose public commitments carried limited practical value. Moto used protected peer networks to interpret institutional events and evaluate risk. Participants read leadership silence, meeting access, budget decisions, and shifting language as evidence of changing institutional conditions.

Building alignment and alliances appeared in participants' efforts to form coalitions across academic units, governance bodies, administrative offices, student affairs, and boards. Maji established co-ownership for initiatives. Busara used governance pathways to place equity within strategic planning and hiring practices. Subira created board-facing accountability structures. These strategies widened participation and extended the work beyond the authority of one office.

Strategic direction and scanning appeared through participants' attention to long-term durability. Hewa connected equity to broader institutional priorities. Subira embedded equity within recurring review processes. Busara moved people and programs into structures with greater institutional stability. Ardhi developed tools that could continue operating following her departure. Participants scanned internal and external environments while establishing footholds for future work.

Hartley et al. (2019) extend political astuteness by connecting it to the creation of public value. This extension is especially relevant to CDO leadership because participants sought outcomes serving students, employees, institutional communities, and broader commitments to educational justice rather than simply protecting organizational process. Their work involved

negotiating competing interests while maintaining attention to whose well-being, access, and belonging institutional decisions advanced.

Participants' strategic adaptations can therefore be understood as efforts to preserve public and educational value under constraint. Reframing language, embedding equity within governance, building coalitions, and redistributing ownership were valuable when they sustained access, accountability, community support, or institutional change. The public-value extension also clarifies why some adaptations generated moral conflict. Strategies that protected institutional reputation while weakening substantive equity outcomes fell short of the value participants sought to create.

The findings refine political astuteness theory by placing its competencies within a racialized institutional field. The same strategic action could be read as thoughtful calibration, excessive caution, avoidance, aggression, or threat depending on the leader enacting it. Direct communication could signify confidence in one leader and disruption in another. Emotional expression could receive recognition as passion or dismissal as instability. Political skill therefore carried unequal costs because participants were reading institutional actors while also being read through racialized and gendered expectations.

This study identifies racialized political astuteness as a refinement of the framework. Racialized political astuteness involves reading and navigating political conditions while accounting for how one's identity, body, credibility, and institutional role are interpreted within those conditions. Participants evaluated the political environment and the organizational meanings attached to their presence. Their strategic calculations included the likely reception of the message and the messenger.

Racialized political astuteness also involved decisions concerning visibility. Participants selected when to speak directly, use coded language, work through allies, embed equity within broader priorities, and withdraw from public exposure. These decisions reflected strategic judgment shaped by institutional purpose, public value, and personal risk.

This refinement connects political astuteness to the theory of racialized organizations. Ray (2019) explains the racialized field within which legitimacy, agency, and resources are distributed. Hartley et al. (2015) explain the strategic capacities participants used to act within that field. Hartley et al. (2019) clarify that the purpose of these capacities extends beyond navigating politics toward creating outcomes of collective and public value. Together, the frameworks explain why strategic competence required more from some participants while providing them less institutional protection.

The Integrated Framework

The strongest analytic insights emerged through the interaction of the four theories. Each framework illuminated one dimension of the findings, while their integration explained how racial structures, organizational arrangements, interpretation, power, and strategic action worked together.

Interest convergence and racial decoupling together explain the conditionality of institutional commitment. Bell (1992) clarifies why support for equity aligned with institutional interests and weakened as political costs increased. Ray (2019) shows how institutions maintained formal commitments while narrowing authority, resources, and implementation. Together, these concepts explain how institutions preserved the appearance of equity while recalibrating its organizational force.

Patton's (2016) application of CRT to higher education and Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations further connect societal structure to ordinary institutional practice. Patton helps explain how higher education reproduces racial hierarchy through routine institutional operations. Ray specifies the organizational mechanisms through which this reproduction occurs. Together, they show how anti-DEI retrenchment entered postsecondary life through language, budgets, policies, leadership judgments, and distributions of authority.

Counter storytelling and identity construction together explain how participants remained legible to themselves under sustained institutional misrecognition. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identify counter stories as forms of knowledge that challenge dominant accounts. Weick (1995) explains how identity shapes interpretation and action. Helms Mills et al. (2010) add that identity construction takes place within power-laden organizational discourse. Together, the frameworks show why participants drew on family memory, ancestry, faith, culture, and community to sustain a coherent sense of self.

Endemic racism and embodied cue extraction together explain why participants' exhaustion carried institutional meaning. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) identify the durability of racialized educational conditions. Weick (1995) explains how people extract cues and form plausible interpretations. Helms Mills et al. (2010) situate those cues within systems of power and organizational history. Participants' bodies registered the cumulative weight of conditions that institutional language frequently obscured.

Whiteness as credential and racialized political astuteness together explain why strategic competence carried unequal costs. Ray (2019) illuminates how credibility and authority are assigned unevenly. Hartley et al. (2015) identify the competencies participants used to navigate

contested institutions. Together, these frameworks show that strategic effectiveness depended on political skill and on the racialized reception of the leader exercising it.

Racial decoupling, retrospective sensemaking, and critical sensemaking together explain the cumulative moral rupture participants experienced. Ray (2019) explains the separation between formal equity commitments and organizational practice. Weick (1995) explains how later events reshape the meaning of earlier experiences. Helms Mills et al. (2010) draw attention to how institutional power, discourse, and official narratives shape these reinterpretations. Participants accumulated evidence of contradiction and used it to reassess earlier relationships, commitments, and professional histories.

Political astuteness, enactment, and public value together explain how participants transformed interpretation into institutional action. Participants read political conditions, built alliances, and pursued strategic direction while creating new organizational arrangements through their actions (Hartley et al., 2015; Weick, 1995). Their dashboards, bylaws, review systems, funded positions, strategic plans, and shared ownership structures altered future possibilities. Hartley et al. (2019) help evaluate these actions according to the collective and educational value they sought to preserve.

Intersectionality strengthened each theoretical combination by grounding the analysis in the differentiated ways participants occupied common structural conditions (Crenshaw, 1989). Race, gender, citizenship, sexuality, language, professional history, and institutional position shaped how participants encountered organizational power, how others interpreted their leadership, and which strategies carried protection or risk.

Theoretical Contributions

The integrated framework clarifies five theoretical contributions.

First, the findings extend interest convergence through the concept of anticipatory interest convergence. Institutional leaders recalibrated equity commitments in response to projected threats involving funding, donors, trustees, political scrutiny, regulation, and reputation. Institutional interest operated through current advantage and anticipated future exposure.

Second, the findings extend the theory of racialized organizations by showing how the CDO role can become an involuntary mechanism of racial decoupling. The presence of a visible and capable equity leader can provide evidence of institutional commitment while broader systems remain unchanged. Participants resisted this possibility by distributing ownership, embedding accountability, and moving equity work into durable institutional structures.

Third, the findings extend sensemaking through critical sensemaking by demonstrating that CDO interpretation was inseparable from power, identity, discourse, and organizational rules. Participants were making sense of institutional events while also navigating who controlled information, which narratives received legitimacy, and whose interpretation could shape institutional action (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

Fourth, the findings identify embodied cue extraction and cumulative moral reinterpretation as extensions of sensemaking. Physical and emotional responses provided participants with information about institutional conditions. Accumulated experiences of contradiction and betrayal also transformed the meaning of earlier professional experiences, producing a moral rupture that extended across time.

Fifth, the findings refine political astuteness through racialized political astuteness and its connection to public value. Strategic leadership involved reading people and institutions while accounting for how participants' bodies, identities, credibility, and communication were interpreted. Participants used political skill to preserve outcomes tied to student well-being,

community belonging, institutional accountability, and educational justice rather than merely navigating organizational conflict (Hartley et al., 2015, 2019).

Across the four theoretical layers, CDO leadership under anti-DEI conditions emerges as a recursive process. Racial structures shaped organizational arrangements. Organizational arrangements shaped lived experience and determined which identities, interpretations, and resources received legitimacy. Lived experience generated embodied, relational, and institutional cues. Participants interpreted those cues within power-laden organizational contexts. Their interpretations informed strategic actions intended to preserve equity and public value. Those actions then altered institutional structures, relationships, discourse, and future possibilities.

This recursive movement demonstrates the value of the integrated framework. Critical race theory identifies the historical, structural, and ideological conditions surrounding the work. The theory of racialized organizations explains how those conditions are reproduced through institutional arrangements. Sensemaking and critical sensemaking explain how participants interpreted evolving conditions within relations of power. Political astuteness theory explains how participants translated interpretation into strategic action and pursued outcomes of institutional and public value.

Together, the frameworks position participants as interpretive and strategic agents whose labor was made necessary, costly, and unevenly protected by the racialized institutions in which they worked. The integrated analysis also shows how CDOs resisted, reproduced, interrupted, and transformed organizational conditions through the everyday practice of equity leadership.

Implications for Practice

The findings carry significant implications for the practice of equity leadership in higher education. Across the four themes, participants showed that CDO work in anti-DEI conditions

requires more than individual resilience, political skill, or personal commitment. The strain of the role was produced by institutional arrangements that placed equity leaders in visible, contested, and often under-protected positions. The practical implications of this study therefore speak to CDOs and DEI practitioners, presidents and senior leaders, boards of trustees, and the broader institutional cultures that shape whether equity work can be sustained with integrity.

CDOs and DEI Practitioners

For CDOs and DEI practitioners, the findings suggest that sustainability should be treated as a professional responsibility and leadership practice. Participants' accounts of exhaustion, moral injury, vigilance, and depletion were patterned responses to institutional contradiction. Moto's statement that "my health has absolutely been impacted" and that some of what this work strained "aren't going to be restored" shows that the cost of the role can exceed ordinary professional fatigue. Maji's annual commitment to "preserve my peace" and Moto's willingness at times to "let it burn" suggest that boundary-setting, role clarity, selective visibility, and deliberate pacing are part of sustainable equity leadership. These practices should be understood as strategic commitments that preserve the leader's capacity to continue the work overtime.

The findings also point to the importance of external networks, peer communities, and politically astute leadership development. Participants frequently described operating as an "island" or an "office of one," which limited opportunities for candid dialogue inside their institutions. External communities of practice can provide perspective, affirmation, strategy, and relief from the isolation of carrying contested work alone. At the same time, moral clarity needs to be joined with political astuteness. CDO onboarding and professional development should include coalition-building, stakeholder mapping, strategic framing, timing, language calibration, and organizational analysis. Participants' quieter forms of progress, such as preserving a

program, protecting staff, embedding equity into a policy, or maintaining a relationship under strain, show that success in hostile contexts often emerges through disciplined, relational, and incremental work.

Presidents, Provosts, and Senior Institutional Leaders

For presidents, provosts, and senior leaders, the findings point to the need for consistent behavioral alignment between institutional values and institutional action. Participants described some of the deepest harm when public endorsement of equity was followed by private hesitation, silence, or retreat. Senior leaders should demonstrate trust through transparent decision-making, follow-through on commitments, visible support during controversy, and shared responsibility for absorbing backlash. Equity work should be publicly owned by the senior team, with presidents, provosts, cabinet members, and CDOs standing together when the work is challenged. Moto's description of presidential silence as "internal treason" captures the moral cost of leaving CDOs to carry institutional courage alone.

Senior leaders should also attend to the daily conditions that make CDO work possible. Participants' accounts showed that access, proximity, communication, and inclusion in decision-making mattered as much as formal statements of support. CDOs need regular access to the spaces where institutional priorities are set, conflicts are interpreted, and risk is managed. Leaders should create predictable channels for consultation before decisions are made, clarify when the CDO's expertise is expected, and avoid using equity leaders mainly after harm has occurred. Such practices communicate that equity leadership is part of institutional strategy rather than a crisis response function.

Boards of Trustees and Governing Bodies

Boards of trustees and governing bodies also have practical responsibilities because participants' accounts located institutional retreat within donor relationships, trustee caution, and anxieties about political exposure. Hewa's account of preemptive concessions to donors and Roho's description of donor-driven constraints on DEI commitments show that board posture can shape what presidents and senior leaders feel free to defend. Boards should examine how their own discourse frames equity work. They should ask whether equity is being treated as an educational commitment, a reputational concern, or a political liability. Board development should include substantive equity literacy, attention to anti-DEI climates, and discussion of how donor pressure can influence institutional courage. This preparation matters because board ambiguity can quickly become institutional caution. Boards should also help create the conditions for sustained institutional courage. Participants' accounts showed that presidential support can become fragile when boards, donors, or public-facing stakeholders treat equity work as a liability. Governing bodies should therefore expect regular discussion of equity priorities, campus climate, legal developments, and institutional risk without allowing risk to become the only frame. They should also ask how CDOs are positioned, protected, and included in institutional decision-making. These practices help move equity from symbolic endorsement into shared institutional responsibility.

Institutional Practice and Culture

At the institutional level, the findings point to the importance of moving equity work from isolated offices into shared practice. Participants repeatedly showed that equity work becomes more vulnerable when it is carried by one person, one office, or one temporary initiative. Maji's insistence that "I don't do any work at all on my own" and Subira's embedding

of equity into “decennial and midterm reviews” show what distributed responsibility can look like in practice. Institutions should build cross-functional equity leadership teams, integrate equity into existing planning and review processes, and make sure that hiring, student success, curriculum, assessment, and budget conversations all include equity-related questions.

Institutional cultures should also recognize preservation as a meaningful form of progress. Under hostile conditions, participants often measured success through quieter forms of movement, such as keeping a program alive, protecting students and staff, sustaining trust, shifting language strategically, or embedding equity into a process that could endure. Institutions that recognize only new initiatives or public announcements can miss the labor required to protect existing gains. Measures of progress should therefore include relational trust, policy integration, distributed leadership, procedural change, and the protection of equity commitments during moments of political pressure.

Finally, institutions should respond to differential risk with care and specificity. Anti-DEI hostility reached participants in uneven ways, shaped by race, gender, immigration history, institutional role, public visibility, and family exposure. Ulinzi’s fear for her family’s physical safety, Huruma’s children being targeted at home, and Subira’s week of threatening emails show that support must extend beyond ordinary workplace encouragement. Institutions should develop practical response plans that include communication support, legal guidance, safety planning, workload adjustment, and attention to the leader’s family when threats move beyond campus. These forms of care communicate that equity leaders are people whose safety, dignity, and sustainability matter.

Implications for Policy

The policy implications of this study build from the same central finding that runs through the four themes. Equity leadership becomes precarious when institutional commitment depends on individual goodwill, temporary leadership alignment, or shifting political appetite. Policy can reduce that precarity by making authority, responsibility, protection, and accountability more durable. The findings point to two related policy needs. Protective policy can reduce role vulnerability, retaliation, and exposure. Enabling policy can ensure that equity work is resourced, embedded, and legitimized as part of the institution's educational mission. Both are necessary for institutions that intend to sustain equity work with integrity.

At the institutional level, equity should be embedded into core policy structures rather than left to the discretion of a single office or individual leader. Institutional policy should integrate equity considerations into strategic planning, hiring and promotion criteria, curriculum review, student success frameworks, resource allocation, and institutional assessment. This kind of integration reduces the likelihood that equity work will remain isolated, symbolic, or easily retrenched when controversy emerges. Participants' accounts showed that equity work became most vulnerable when it was positioned as the responsibility of one leader without corresponding authority across the institution.

Institutional policy should also clarify the authority, scope, and protections attached to senior equity leadership roles. CDO responsibilities should include participation in executive decision-making, access to relevant institutional data, meaningful involvement in policy review, and clear pathways for consultation before major decisions are finalized. These expectations should be written into role descriptions, governance documents, cabinet structures, and institutional procedures rather than left to informal practice. Participants' accounts showed that

ambiguity often benefited institutional caution. Clear policy language can reduce the interpretive burden placed on CDOs by naming when and how their expertise should be engaged.

Role protection should also become a formal policy concern. Institutions should establish safeguards against retaliatory diminishment, sudden reporting-line changes, symbolic restructuring, or role compression during periods of political pressure. These safeguards matter because participants described how institutional retreat often appeared through subtle shifts in access, visibility, title, reporting structure, and decision-making authority. Policy cannot guarantee courage, but it can make quiet retreat more visible and more difficult to enact without review, explanation, and accountability.

At the state level, the findings point to the power of ambiguity in shaping institutional behavior. Participants' institutions often responded to perceived political climates, governing-board anxieties, donor concerns, and national anti-DEI narratives before any formal mandate required change. This means that state agencies, coordinating boards, and public systems can influence institutional behavior through the clarity or uncertainty of their own guidance. State-level policy should affirm the legal permissibility and educational value of equity-related work, especially in areas connected to access, student success, inclusive learning environments, nondiscrimination, and belonging. Clear guidance can help institutions distinguish between legitimate legal compliance and anticipatory retreat.

State-level policy should also account for institutional diversity. Broadly written policies can have uneven consequences across institutional types, especially for colleges and universities that serve larger numbers of historically marginalized students or hold missions directly connected to access and equity. Policy frameworks should therefore attend to differences across community colleges, regional public institutions, minority-serving institutions, private

institutions, and specialized institutions. As Barnett (2020) suggests, institutional context matters when assessing how equity work is understood, justified, and sustained.

State-level discourse also has policy consequences. When public agencies, governing bodies, or political leaders frame DEI primarily as partisan controversy, they create a permission structure for institutional retreat. When they frame access, belonging, fair process, and student success as central to higher education's public mission, they create a stabilizing context for equity leaders and institutions. McLendon et al. (2009) remind us that higher education governance is shaped by political environments as well as formal policy mechanisms. This study extends that insight by showing how political atmosphere can shape institutional decision-making even before legislation or regulation requires action.

At the federal level, the findings point to the need for clear guidance that helps institutions understand the permissible scope and educational value of equity-related work. Participants' accounts showed that ambiguity did not produce neutrality. It often produced caution, silence, or preemptive retreat. Federal guidance can therefore serve an important stabilizing function by affirming institutions' responsibility to address systemic inequity, support historically marginalized populations, and create educational environments conducive to access and belonging. Such guidance should clarify the difference between unlawful discrimination and lawful equity-related practices that advance educational opportunity, campus climate, and student success.

Federal accountability frameworks should also be designed carefully. Metrics that capture only what is easiest to count may reward performative compliance rather than structural change. Participants described institutions that could maintain the appearance of equity commitment while narrowing the force, visibility, or substance of the work. Accountability systems should

therefore attend to both outcomes and infrastructure, including access to opportunity, student success patterns, campus climate, role authority, resource allocation, and mechanisms for shared responsibility. Jackson (2025) and Desir and Posselt (2025) underscore the importance of policy environments that support equity work while recognizing the complexity of institutional implementation.

Professional organizations, accrediting bodies, and leadership associations also have policy influence because they shape norms, standards, and expectations across the field. These organizations can articulate clearer standards for responsible equity leadership, including expectations for reporting structures, staffing, decision-making authority, resources, psychological safety, and protections against symbolic appointment without substantive support. They can also provide model policies, board education tools, leadership development programs, and institutional self-assessment frameworks that help colleges and universities evaluate whether equity work is structurally supported or merely rhetorically affirmed.

Professional associations are also well positioned to counter the isolation participants described. They can create structured spaces for peer learning, mentorship, and collective problem-solving among CDOs navigating politically hostile or institutionally ambivalent contexts. They can also advocate publicly for the legitimacy of equity work and provide shared ethical language that shifts the conversation from individual endurance to institutional responsibility. This matters because participants frequently described the limits of what could be said candidly within their own institutions.

Across institutional, state, federal, and professional policy contexts, the central implication is clear. Equity leadership becomes sustainable when policy reduces precarity, clarifies legitimacy, protects role authority, and distributes responsibility across the institution.

The findings show that CDOs can carry significant strategic, relational, and interpretive labor, yet that labor becomes costly and unstable when policy structures leave equity work dependent on personal courage alone. Policy that supports equity leadership must therefore do more than name institutional values. It must create the conditions under which those values can be defended, practiced, and sustained over time.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings open important pathways for continued research on CDOs, equity leadership, and the conditions under which diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, belonging, and access work is carried out in higher education. As an IPA grounded in the lived meaning-making of a specific group of CDOs in New England, this study offers depth and interpretive insight into a particular moment while leaving much still to be understood.

One direction involves expanding geographic and political contexts. This study focused on New England, a region often imagined as politically progressive, yet participants' accounts showed clearly that institutional retreat, coded resistance, and anticipatory caution were alive there as well. Comparative research across states with formally enacted anti-DEI restrictions, states where such efforts remain proposed or contested, and states responding more to political atmosphere than to formal policy would help the field understand whether the patterns identified here travel across contexts in similar ways or take distinct forms.

Future research should also attend more fully to institutional type and mission. Participants in this study were primarily located in private and predominantly White institutions, and further inquiry is needed on CDOs and related leaders in community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, faith-based colleges, public regional universities, and elite research institutions. These settings

may reveal different relationships among equity mission, political vulnerability, resourcing, and role authority.

The scope of inquiry should also broaden to include equity-facing roles beyond the CDO, because participants' narratives made visible how equity labor is often dispersed across associate provosts, vice presidents, deans, directors, student affairs leaders, faculty equity fellows, department chairs, and staff with no formal DEI title. Research that follows where the work has gone, who is carrying it, and at what cost would make an important contribution, particularly at a time when some institutions are removing, renaming, or diffusing DEI roles while expecting the labor itself to continue.

Deeper attention to identity and positionality is also needed. Anti-DEI hostility was never distributed evenly; it was mediated by race, gender, institutional position, personal history, and the particular ways participants were read within their organizational contexts. Comparative studies that attend to race, gender, sexuality, immigration history, disability, class background, and professional pathway could deepen understanding of how risk is embodied and interpreted across differently situated leaders.

Longitudinal research is also needed to track how CDOs' strategies, identities, well-being, and professional commitments evolve over time, including questions of attrition and staying: who remains in these roles, under what conditions, and with what long-term cost or transformation. Methodological expansion beyond IPA—including narrative inquiry, multi-site case studies, mixed-methods research, and collaborative or participatory designs—could extend what this study began to surface. Research in this area will matter not only for academic knowledge, but for professional survival, institutional accountability, and the preservation of more just possibilities in higher education.

Reflection

As I come to the close of this study, I carry a deeper and more personal understanding of what equity leadership asks of those who live it each day. I entered this work with a strong sense that leadership for equity in higher education extends far beyond policy, planning, and institutional strategy. It moves through bodies, relationships, judgment, memory, and the daily work of sustaining purpose inside institutions whose support can be uneven, contingent, and difficult to trust fully. That understanding shaped the care, discipline, and attentiveness I brought to participants' narratives throughout the study, and it remained with me as their words accumulated into a pattern that felt both deeply familiar and newly clarifying.

What became clearer over time was the shared nature of an experience that can feel singular while one is living inside it. As I listened across interviews, I heard patterns that reached across campuses, titles, and institutional settings. Participants described the careful reading of when to speak and when to wait, when to translate and when to press, and how to continue advancing equity work inside institutions that embrace its language more readily than its demands. Their accounts gave sharper shape to a professional reality I recognized, and they expanded my understanding of that reality beyond my own experience into a broader portrait of leadership under strain, leadership under scrutiny, and leadership sustained through determination, judgment, and moral clarity.

The study also deepened my understanding of the cost of the role. I began knowing that CDO work carries weight. I leave with a fuller appreciation of how that weight is patterned, racialized, embodied, and produced through institutional contradiction. Participants' narratives made clear that exhaustion, vigilance, grief, and moral strain were woven into the organizational conditions they navigated. Hearing leaders with long records of experience describe these same

pressures brought a particular kind of clarity. Their words helped me recognize with greater precision that the burden so many equity leaders carry belongs to a larger set of institutional arrangements that deserve fuller naming and stronger accountability.

This study also changed how I understand endurance. For a long time, endurance has carried too much of the meaning of leadership in equity work. Participants widened that meaning for me. In their accounts, resistance included direct challenge, and it also included strategic patience, careful restraint, disciplined presence, and the rooted choice to remain engaged through difficult seasons. Their words restored value to forms of labor that public discourse often overlooks, and they reminded me that steady, thoughtful, and quiet forms of holding the line carry their own courage and their own consequence.

I close this study changed by the people who shaped it. I am more attentive to what this work asks of those who carry it, more protective of the leaders who continue to do it, and more convinced that institutional retreat is something institutions themselves must answer for with honesty and seriousness. I carry deep gratitude for the participants who entrusted me with their stories. I also carry a strengthened sense of responsibility to honor what they offered by continuing to name the conditions under which equity leadership becomes possible, sustainable, and just. Equity leadership deserves institutional courage, and part of the work ahead lies in naming with greater clarity the difference between that courage and the individual sacrifice institutions have too often relied upon.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how CDOs in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while continuing to advance institutional equity initiatives.

Through an IPA of participants' narratives, this dissertation shows that equity leadership in this

moment is shaped by the constant interplay of precarity and purpose, harm and strategy, exhaustion and vision, with each participant making meaning inside institutions that often relied on their labor while wavering in their willingness to protect it.

Across the four themes, participants revealed the layered reality of leading equity work in hostile institutional environments. In Performing Compliance, Enacting Resistance, they described the unstable ground beneath the work through coded language, strategic caution, institutional hesitancy, and quiet retreat. In Embodied Racial Harm, they showed that anti-DEI hostility moved beyond public controversy and into the body, the spirit, the relationships, and the inner life of the leader. In Resistant Political Praxis, they made visible the disciplined and relational labor required to move equity forward under constraint. In Counter-Narrative as Survival, they showed that sustaining the work also required memory, identity, grounding, and a continued refusal to let the institution become the final author of one's meaning.

The findings answer the central research question by showing that CDOs experience anti-DEI sentiment as an ongoing institutional condition shaped by ambiguity, under-resourcing, racialized exposure, and contested legitimacy. They interpret that condition through continual sensemaking as they read leadership behavior, policy shifts, organizational silences, and relational cues. They respond through an evolving practice of recalibration, coalition building, reframing, boundary setting, and structural persistence, and that practice gives their leadership its recursive, embodied, politically attuned, and morally charged character. Institutions often depended on the labor, credibility, and vision of CDOs while withholding the authority, protection, and structural support that would allow that labor to remain sustainable over time. The leaders charged with helping institutions become more just were often left to navigate injustice within the very structures they were expected to transform.

A final boundary deserves naming even here, at the close. The meaning-rich quality of these accounts is itself partly a condition of who was present to give them. A two-round study of how CDOs navigate and make sense of anti-DEI hostility selects, almost by design, for those who endured long enough to narrate it and who had arrived at an interpretive frame capacious enough to hold it. Leaders who left the work without a redemptive account, who were pushed out before sensemaking could consolidate, or who experienced the period as defeat without strategy are underrepresented here. The resilience, hope, and hard-won equanimity that thread through these findings should therefore be read not as the typical outcome of equity leadership under hostility but as the situated meaning-making of those positioned, by endurance and by circumstance, to construct it. This does not weaken what the study found, but it bounds it: this dissertation describes how this work can be survived and made meaningful, not how often it is.

The implications of this study reach across practice, policy, and scholarship because they call institutions toward accountability, they call senior leaders toward a more serious understanding of what equity work requires, and they call scholars toward continued study of this moment with precision and care. What stays with me at the end of this work is the way participants expanded the meaning of leadership itself. They showed that equity leadership includes moral labor, interpretive labor, relational labor, and future-making labor, all of which unfold in the space between what an institution says it values and what it is willing to risk to live those values out. The stories told here matter because they name what institutions too often obscure, they clarify what this work costs, and they preserve a fuller account of what remains possible even in conditions shaped by fear and retreat.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT OUTREACH EMAIL

Subject: Research Invitation: Understanding CDO Leadership in an Anti-DEI Climate

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Gloria Noronha, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Colorado State University. I am currently conducting a dissertation study under the mentorship of Dr. Susana Muñoz focused on how Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives.

Given your leadership in this space, I would be honored to learn from your experiences.

About the Study

This study uses a qualitative methodology called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which centers your voice and lived experience. The purpose is to understand how CDOs make meaning of their roles, adapt to institutional resistance, and sustain equity efforts in the face of sociopolitical backlash. The study is grounded in a conceptual framework that includes:

- **Critical Race Theory** (to contextualize systemic resistance),
- **Theory of Racialized Organizations** (to understand institutional dynamics),
- **Political Astuteness Theory** (to explore leadership navigation), and
- **Sensemaking Theory** (to examine meaning-making in real time).

Participation Details

- You'll be asked to complete a brief demographic survey
- Participate in two virtual interviews (60–90 minutes each)
- Review your transcript and share reflections (optional)

Confidentiality Your participation will be completely confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

If you're open to participating or have questions, please contact me at gloria.r.noronha@gmail.com or 617-676-7611. I would be happy to share more about the process and your rights as a participant.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to potentially connecting with you.

Warmly,

Gloria Noronha

Doctoral Candidate

Colorado State University

gloria.r.noronha@gmail.com | 617-676-7611

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title: *Navigating Resistance, Advancing Equity: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of How Chief Diversity Officers Experience, Interpret, and Respond to Anti-DEI Sentiment in Higher Education*

Principal Investigator: Dr. Susana Muñoz, Associate Professor, Colorado State University

Co-Principal Investigator: Gloria Noronha, Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University

IRB Protocol Number: #6988

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to understand how Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while working to advance institutional equity initiatives. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study will examine how CDOs make meaning of their roles, navigate institutional resistance, and adapt their leadership practices amid complex sociopolitical challenges. The study is framed by a multi-layered conceptual framework that includes sensemaking theory, political astuteness theory, the theory of racialized organizations, and critical race theory.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Complete a brief demographic survey
- Participate in two virtual semi-structured interviews (each 60–90 minutes)
- Review and verify interview transcripts for accuracy
- Optionally provide feedback on emerging themes during the analysis phase

Risks and Discomforts

There is minimal risk in participating. You may encounter emotional discomfort when discussing professional or political challenges. You may skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Benefits

Your participation will:

- Contribute to scholarship on equity leadership in contested environments
- Help identify strategies for sustaining DEI efforts during periods of backlash
- Support future research, leadership development, and institutional practice

Confidentiality

Your identity will remain confidential. A pseudonym will replace your name and any identifiable details in all study materials and reports. Interview recordings will be stored on encrypted, password-protected devices and deleted after transcription and verification.

Voluntary Participation

Participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time and request that your data be excluded from the study.

Questions or Concerns

Contact:

- Gloria Noronha at gloria.r.noronha@gmail.com | 617-676-7611
- Dr. Susana Muñoz at susana.munoz@colostate.edu | 970-491-6812
- For questions about your rights, contact CSU IRB: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu | 970-491-1553

Consent Statement

By signing this form, I confirm that:

- I understand the study's purpose, procedures, and risks
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions
- I agree to participate and to have my interviews audio-recorded

Participant Name (Print): _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Name (Print): _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please complete the following demographic survey prior to your first interview. This information is used solely to provide context for the study and will be kept confidential. You may skip any question you are uncomfortable answering.

Contact & Identity Information

1. Full name:
2. Preferred pseudonym (if any):
3. Gender pronouns:
4. Preferred email:
5. Preferred phone number:

Social & Professional Identity

6. Racial/ethnic identity:
7. Gender identity:
8. Date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY):
9. Socioeconomic background (self-identified):
☐ Working Class ☐ Middle Class ☐ Upper Class ☐ Other (please specify):
10. What is your highest level of education?

Family Background

11. What is your mother's highest level of education?
12. What is your father's highest level of education?

Professional Background

13. What is your current job title and institutional affiliation (or most recent if no longer in role)?
14. When did you begin your current or most recent CDO position?
15. What other higher education institutions have you worked at, and in what roles?
16. Have you held faculty appointments? If yes, please indicate whether they were tenured or tenure-track.
17. What best describes your current institutional setting (e.g., private/public, size, region)?
18. What is your current professional position if you are no longer in a CDO role?

All responses are confidential and used solely for the purpose of contextualizing your experiences in this study.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study Title:

Navigating Resistance, Advancing Equity: Chief Diversity Officers' Experiences and Responses to Anti-DEI Sentiment in Higher Education

Research Question:

How do Chief Diversity Officers in higher education experience, interpret, and respond to anti-DEI sentiment while advancing institutional equity initiatives?

First Interview – Experiencing Identity, Resistance, and Organizational Context

Estimated Time: 60–90 minutes

This first interview focuses on your leadership journey, personal and professional identity, and how you experience and interpret DEI leadership within racialized institutional structures and broader sociopolitical pressures.

Introduction

- Welcome, confirm consent, and review confidentiality
- Remind participant of the voluntary nature of the study
- Begin recording with permission

Section 1: Personal and Professional Trajectory

1. Can you describe your current role and how long you've served in it?
2. What led you to pursue leadership work focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
3. How would you describe the institutional and broader political context in which you work?

Section 2: Identity and Experience within Organizational Structures

4. How have your racial, gender, or other salient identities shaped your approach to leadership?
5. Can you describe a time when your personal identities intersected with institutional resistance or support for your DEI work?
6. How do you experience and interpret the racialized or politicized nature of DEI work in your institutional context?

Section 3: Interpreting External and Internal Pressures

7. What messages—explicit or implicit—have you received from your institution about the legitimacy or priority of DEI work?
8. How have recent state laws, national discourse, or political actions impacted your institution's DEI stance?
9. How have these broader forces shaped your everyday leadership practices or decision-making?

Closing

- Is there anything else about your leadership experiences you would like to share?
- Brief preview of the next interview
- Schedule Interview #2

Second Interview – Responding Strategically to Resistance and Leading Change

Estimated Time: 60–90 minutes

This second interview explores your strategic responses, meaning-making under pressure, political navigation, and leadership practices aimed at sustaining equity work in contested environments.

Section 1: Strategic Response and Sensemaking

1. Can you share an example of a time when you had to recalibrate your DEI leadership approach due to political or institutional pushback?
2. How do you make sense of when to act boldly versus when to proceed more cautiously in advancing equity efforts?
3. What factors or frameworks guide your strategic decision-making in high-stakes situations?

Section 2: Navigating Power and Organizational Resistance

4. How do you read and respond to power dynamics within your institution?
5. What strategies have been most effective for building credibility, influence, or trust among senior leaders, governing boards, or external stakeholders?
6. How do you navigate visible and invisible forms of resistance from colleagues, departments, or governance structures?

Section 3: Coalition-Building, Framing, and Political Astuteness

7. Who do you rely on for support, strategy, or collaboration within and beyond your institution?
8. What approaches have helped you build coalitions or gain allies for equity initiatives?
9. How do you strategically frame or adapt DEI messaging to resonate with different institutional audiences or decision-makers?

Section 4: Resilience, Reflection, and Leadership Legacy

10. How do you sustain your personal resilience and well-being while leading equity work amid political hostility?
11. How do you define success in your role, especially when progress is incremental or contested?
12. What lessons have you learned about sustaining DEI initiatives during times of heightened scrutiny or opposition?
13. What advice would you offer to emerging or current CDOs navigating similar challenges?

Closing

- Any final reflections or insights you would like to share?
- Explain next steps in the research process
- Thank the participant for their time and contributions