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Buried Seeds: Women of Color Leaders in Student Affairs Managing the Interplay of Free
Speech and Inclusion

By

Ankita Rakhe

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Associate Professor T. Britton, Chair

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Spring 2026

Buried Seeds: Women of Color Leaders in Student Affairs Managing the Interplay of Free
Speech and Inclusion

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By

Ankita Rakhe

Abstract

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Women of color (WOC) leaders in student affairs are at the nexus of the interplay of free speech and inclusion. However, this phenomena has been rarely researched and their roles have been often ignored. This descriptive study examined how WOC leaders in student affairs, who managed the interplay, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. Ten WOC leaders with at least 10 years of experience from institutions across the United States participated in the study, with each participating in one 60-minute Zoom interview.

Findings showed WOC made dynamic shifts to adjust for structural racism's inequities; WOC interwove knowledge, skills, and support as their grounding; and WOC approaches included practicing, sensemaking, and embodying the interplay. A final finding showed successful interplay management needed systemic support of institutions. Factors impeding the work included systemic barriers that caused heightened values misalignment for the WOC due to disproportionate racialized and gendered harm. WOC preparation to manage the interplay included understanding disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, ensuring students feel supported, and building support systems. WOC managed the interplay by learning, reflecting, and acting with equity. Institutions need to systemically support WOC's leadership and student learning to commit to equity and inclusion. Conclusions showed WOC relationships are key and confirmed free speech policies are raced and the interplay is gendered and racialized labor. Institutions' embeddedness of structural racism affected the interplay, and as such, neutrality does not exist in nonneutral institutions. Finally, without distributing power among administrators, faculty, and staff, inequities are perpetuated.

Recommendations surface the need for strategic mitigation of inequities perpetuated by systemic racism and surfaced through the interplay. Considerations for WOC, cabinet-level leaders, and systemic practices include institutionalizing support systems for WOC, reframing

an institutional approach to the interplay to give WOC experts control, embracing an equitable shared governance structure, and challenging the presumption of institutional neutrality. Together, the implications, conclusions, and recommendation for future research, paint a robust picture of the importance of these women's roles in impacting policies, practices, and systems within higher education.

Dedication

To the 10 women who participated in this study, providing perspicacity, warmth, humor, and affirmation, transforming my approach as a scholar and practitioner.

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to be the best combination of the both of you and will take that forward in all my work as a scholar, practitioner, and person.

Chapter 1: Introduction

When considering the critical interaction that exists between inclusion and free speech at universities (Ben-Poarth, 2017; Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018; Miller et al., 2018a), it is rare to center the role of student affairs staff in addressing these tensions. Yet, women of color (WOC) in student affairs undertake disproportionate labor in addressing the majority of diversity-related initiatives (Anderson, 2021; Vigil et al., 2023) because, many times, they are more likely to be designated to address critical incidents and crises around marginalized identities and tend to be at the center of these incidents (Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019).

Though free speech has been one of the most upheld principles on college campuses (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018), the protections afforded by free speech policies can feel like conflicting interests when combined with diversity and inclusion values established by the university (Miller et al., 2018a). This tension includes incidents that fall under protected speech, such as but not limited to the use of slurs, xenophobic events planned by a student organization, speakers who espouse hate, and campus activism where not all voices are equitably heard. Considerations for how campus climate is affected by incidents has shown a history of harm and denigration to marginalized communities of both staff and students (Briscoe, 2022; Leath et al., 2021). It should be noted the upholding of free speech on campuses was also contested at the time of this study by way of federal actions, such as the compact for higher education, one big beautiful bill, and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's probing of various universities for civil rights infractions (Linehan et al., 2025), adding a layer of complexity to this tension. Additionally, the current federal government has targeted higher education and free speech on college campuses, whether it is about campus speakers, debate and dialogue, or academic freedom (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2026). At the same time, educational institutions have highlighted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a positive aspect in a healthy campus climate (Morgan et al., 2022; Rankin & Reason, 2008), raising a point of tension. When incidents involving students' free speech rights interface with the ideals of inclusion, universities have obligations both to protect the free speech rights and to protect the students, as well as ensure all students are allowed equal access to education (Soucek, 2023). The juxtaposition of those ideas can create a tense campus climate, especially for any student affairs staff on the ground, addressing these incidents (Duran-Leftin & Duran, 2021).

Problem Statement

WOC leaders in student affairs are often tasked with addressing the interplay of inclusion and free speech in universities. Robinson (2021) postulated this is due to underpinning whiteness embedded in the field of student affairs, and higher education in general. Meanwhile, universities have frequently espoused a commitment to democratic engagement, whether through marketing and communications or direct action of presidents and/or chancellors (Hartman, 2013). For WOC, their intersectionality, a double marginalization (Maramba, 2011), creates a vastly different experience from white and/or male staff. Such experiences include emotional labor, the task of ensuring others feel supported and affirmed and gendered racial battle fatigue, the cumulative effects of enduring racism and sexism (Anderson, 2021; Eckert & Broadhurst, 2023). These experiences are coupled with experiences with whiteness whereby racism is so systemically engrained in institutions it is invisibilized (Cabrera et al., 2017) and harms WOC in student affairs (Boss & Bravo, 2020; Briscoe & Jones,

2022). These factors, alongside personal commitments to equity (Robinson, 2021), impact the role in which these women operate, in particular to this tension. Moving forward, the word interplay is used to mean enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside an individual's own equity and inclusion values.

Understanding how WOC leaders in student affairs carry out the work of the interplay can increase understanding of how universities can reflect the democracies in which they exist. Given their positionality, these women leaders face a unique set of challenges in doing this work. Research has shown WOC are more likely than white women to support belonging initiatives for all students (Robinson, 2021; Squire et al., 2023), to uphold free speech policies, and to question who gets access to platforms for free speech (Ben-Porath, 2020; Moore & Bell, 2017). In considering the interplay of their intersectional identities and their role managing free speech policies and inclusive measures and shaping systems, their influence in leadership decisions could impact systems on campus, allowing for increased democratic engagement of students and their own increased engagement. This would help dissipate what Anderson (2021) referred to as inequitable requirements imposed on them to prove their worthiness as citizens of the institution.

WOC have been systemically excluded from leadership (P. H. Collins, 2015) even though they have been primed as collectivist decision makers (Squire et al., 2023), indicating their holistic consideration of everyone. However, WOC in student affairs have been included in facilitating the management of campus conflict, taking on disproportionate labor in addressing diversity-related initiatives, including incidents at the nexus of this interplay (Anderson, 2021; Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019; Vigil et al., 2023). Despite these factors, institutional decision makers often excluded WOC from decision making (Moore & Bell, 2017; Squire et al., 2023). Furthermore, Rowe-Allen and Smith (2019) astutely stated, "Students and faculty . . . are governed by the principles of academic freedom. Yet, it must be noted that student affairs professionals . . . do not have this liberty" (p. 190). Lack of this privilege can affect their roles and, in turn, is part of the inequity they experience and could be key to how institutions move toward staff-centered equity.

Finally, I would be remiss not to consider the implications of current federal actions such as the freezing university research funding, dismantling of DEI initiatives on campuses, challenging tax exemption as it relates to DEI, targeted probes on antisemitism, the Office of Civil Rights increase of Title VI investigations, restructuring of federal student aid, and, finally, imposing ideological requirements through a revised accreditation process (Linehan et al., 2025) on higher education institutions systemically, which are intrinsically retooling the core foundations of our democracy to an oligarchy. This issue hinders legal requirements centered on ensuring inclusion exists in higher education (Moore & Bell, 2017). Lucas et al. (2025) emphasized anti-DEI efforts deeply affected student affairs staff's ability to create inclusive spaces for students and impacted their own mental health by white-washing inclusive efforts.

Statement of Purpose

This descriptive research study examined how WOC leaders in student affairs who managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion, sometimes solely referred to as interplay, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. The interplay was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities.

Critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010) in the simplest terms asks how something happened and what it means with a lens of power and privilege. Thus, critical sensemaking was embedded into this research.

Research Questions

In this research, interplay of free speech and inclusion, sometimes solely referred to as the interplay, was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities. I sought answers to the following research questions:

1. In regard to the interplay of free speech and inclusion, how does the campus climate of the institutions of women of color leaders affect their role?
2. What precursors assist women of color leaders in student affairs in understanding and approaching the interplay of free speech and inclusion?
3. How do women leaders of color in student affairs navigate the interplay of free speech and inclusion?
4. What institutional commitments enhance women of color leaders' managements of the interplay of free speech and inclusion?

Overview of Research Design

This descriptive study allowed for an understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Tisdell et al., 2025). In this case, the phenomenon was the careful negotiation of managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion and the participants, WOC leaders in student affairs. A goal of using a descriptive qualitative process was to use a basic methodology to capture and focus on various perspectives and first-hand knowledge (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). The data collection methods included a two-step process. First, a demographic form was filled out by interested participants to collect background information and serve as a means of representational distribution (Mills & Gay, 2019). Second, I conducted a semistructured 60-minute interview over video conferencing services with each participant. Video conferencing allowed me to connect with participants across the country most easily. This study focused on the experiences of WOC in student affairs who served in director-level, mid-level manager, assistant or associate vice president or vice provost (AVP), or assistant or associate vice chancellor (AVC) roles with at least 10 years of full-time experience. Senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) were excluded from the study because I wanted to find participants who were not the highest decision maker in the division and were not already a highly researched group. Collectively, I called the women I was studying WOC leaders in student affairs. I focused on inductive thematic analysis, starting with the data to build themes. As Braun and Clarke (2013) stated, inductive coding is, to a degree, inherently influenced by researcher positionality. From the themes, I was able to create findings that answered the research question. Finally, I synthesized the data from the findings with scholarship to develop implications, conclusions, and recommendations.

Rationale and Significance of Research

This research and its implications are timely. Though free speech exists in the public sphere across this country, it carries a more profound impact on college campuses due to the social connections and the tension with inclusion (Ramlo, 2020; University of California Berkeley School of Law, 2024). The tensions of free speech and inclusion have existed for most of modern times (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018). However, in recent years, it has become a

contested topic on campuses and the public eye. Though I had personal interest in researching this topic prior, the watershed moments affirmed and validated the need for deeper research. As two of its major concerns with higher education, the Trump administration pushed back against both free speech on campus and inclusion, codifying the disintegration of the DEI landscape and punishing speech that opposed the views of this federal administration (Chemersinsky & Gillman, 2026; Linehan et al., 2025). For institutions, the impetus for this research was to show how they could leverage and uplift WOC in student affairs (an underresearched community) in service of the communal good to give them agency and voice and help these institutions enact their inclusive values (Bazner, 2022), knowing that the impact across campus life is transformative. The lessons from the research could allow student affairs leaders and university administrators to better serve the student community, supporting students to understand how to uphold both principles simultaneously.

The rationale for focusing on WOC leaders in student affairs was due to research that has shown their experiences and actions have been very different from those of white women, stemming from historical tropes, stereotypes, and social status of WOC leaders (Accapadi, 2007; Wijeyesinghe, 2021). This research was a way of systematically decentralizing whiteness in the field. Another goal of the research was to frame the agency for WOC leaders in student affairs. They should feel empowered to slowly enact change by voicing their ideas and concerns to help grow an institution. Additionally, the insight from this research could help WOC leaders in student affairs develop tools to respond to this interplay.

Finally, it is important to consider how this research will inform systems thinking in education. A systemic approach requires short- and long-term strategic thinking (Kahneman, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to understand if individual staff can be empowered to make systemic recommendations. It would also be important to know how to help university leadership who control those systems center WOC leaders in student affairs' expertise. Research has shown higher education institutions take time to make changes (Hurtado et al., 1998) and systems thinking acknowledges that leaders think slowly (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.), establishing the two to be intertwined. These research lessons can allow student affairs leaders and university administrators to better serve the student community, educating students on how to uphold both principles simultaneously. Additionally, the insight from this research can better equip WOC leaders in student affairs with tools to respond to this interplay.

Researcher Assumptions

My positionality was shaped by the intersection of my social identities and my experiences in the world. I also have a womanist worldview, a mental model that shapes how I think about the world and how people interact in it. Specifically, a womanist worldview overlaps with intersectionality and the centering of WOC, championed by Black feminists with Walker (2012) at the helm. My social identities as a South Asian American woman and heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, and middle-class person informed my work. Where I had privilege in these identities, I had gaps in my understanding of the world, and where I was minoritized by the system, I had one experience of injustice. I identify as a woman of color in student affairs, and my current professional role included working with the interplay of free speech and inclusion. Additionally, I worked and studied at the University of California, Berkeley, the birthplace of the free speech movement. The significant impact that the history and climate of that institution had on my approach, understanding, and view was not lost on

me, as both a practitioner and scholar. This research was conducted a year after the October 2023 resurgence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from which encampments and a rise in free speech activism grew on college campuses; this time was followed by a year of less activism, possibly the effect of chilled speech.

Assumptions and biases were made due to my positionality as a student affairs professional and my desire for student affairs professionals to be championed. Additionally, my strong commitment to principles of equity, justice, belonging, diversity, and inclusion informed who I am personally and professionally. I personally identify as a tempered radical (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), a person who slowly works to make change within a system. I elaborate on this concept in the literature review. I also identify as a systems leader and tend to look at a broad overview. Additionally, I needed to be careful about my use and bias toward using WOC, which some research has shown to be alienating (Niskodé-Dossett et al., 2011), and though there may be similarities, differences exist in how characteristics take shape (Maramba, 2011; Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021). However, the intersectional roots of WOC are grounded in solidarity (Matos et al., 2021) and informed my epistemology and ontology as a researcher. Therefore, I chose to use the phrase WOC as an affirmation of this solidarity. Palfrey (2017) and Chemerinsky and Gilman's (2018) mantra was to "counter speech with more speech" to espouse one's values. The core idea being that when an actor disagrees with a concept or idea, to use their voice to challenge it. As a practitioner with these values, this research was my embodiment of that core free speech tenet within the current political climate.

Definitions of Key Terminology

- **Women of Color (WOC):** Though a singular definition is hard to come by, WOC is a political term of social justice to speak to experiences of women in the context of white supremacy. It was first used during the 1977 National Women's Conference. Several Black women crafted a new platform to replace a centrally misaligned one, and other racially minoritized women requested inclusion in it. The Black women welcomed them to recognize the minoritization all WOC face (Matos et al., 2021; Zavella, 2022). This term includes two distinct social identities: gender and race and cannot be considered without the word, *intersectionality*. For the purposes of this study, WOC refers to Asian American, including East and Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islanders (AAPI); Black/African/African American; Latina/Hispanic; Native American, Alaskan Native and/or Indigenous; South Asian, Southwest Asian, and North African (SSWANA); and mixed-race women, including those mixed with white. It includes anyone who identifies as a woman, including transgender women. WOC is purposely used in this study as an affirmation of solidarity, recalling its historical roots.
- **Student affairs:** The field of student affairs focuses on centering student outcomes of belonging, well-being, learning and development, and success (NASPA, n.d.). The day-to-day work includes, but is not limited to, overseeing protest and student activism response, creating student-centered educational homes in residence halls, supporting student organizations and student government's leadership development, providing crisis response and care, advising and career readiness, overseeing conduct and community standards, and running identity centers.
- **Time, place, and manner (TPM):** An oft-used phrase in college and university settings in reference to when, where, and how campus activism can take place; a university can

legally limit some of those functions so as to not disrupt business practices (e.g., not disturb students in classes, events, and programs). Drawn from the origins of the First Amendment, it is meant to minimize disruptions in reasonable ways, so that campuses can designate free speech areas (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018).

- **Free speech on college campuses:** Historically, deemed as the rights of students to “express unpopular and radical views” (Ben-Porath, 2020, p. 4), more students today have been concerned about how differing views may affect them and/or their peers in marginalized communities.
- **Intersectionality:** The interconnection of two or more identities, with a lens of power dynamics associated with those identities and their interplay. It is both critical theory and critical praxis and used as an analytical tool (Crenshaw, 1991). It is influenced profoundly by systems and narratives creating power dynamics outside an individual’s choices and autonomy. It drew from social movements of the 1960s and the centrality of Black women’s labor in defining it should be acknowledged.
- **Whiteness:** Within higher education, whiteness (distinguished from white people) is a discourse, systemic structure, and combination of habits and behaviors that center on the failure to recognize racial inequity that is ingrained both historically and contemporarily (E. H. Collins et al., 2020). Note, I chose to use whiteness and white without the capital W, as suggested by the American Psychological Association’s (2020) style guide (7th edition) to decentralize whiteness, a method borrowed from Garcia et al. (2019).
- **Student affairs staffing structures:** These are staffing leveling are drawn from NASPA (n.d.), a leading professional organization for student affairs practitioners, designations but I coined the descriptions.
 - **Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs):** The senior-most officer responsible for a division of student affairs. At times, they sit on a university cabinet. Could have titles like vice president or vice chancellor for student affairs. None of the participants in the study are part of this group.
 - **Assistant or Associate Vice Presidents/Vice Provosts (AVPs) or Vice Chancellors (AVCs):** These are staff who usually sit within a student affairs cabinet, could be the “Number 2” within the division, and often are given license to make broad decisions on behalf of the university, but are not the ultimate decision makers in the Student Affairs division. They are distinct from SSAOs.
 - **Senior Level Staff:** Associate and assistant dean type-roles who manage complex issues within the division and likely manage a portfolio of offices in their reporting line; typically have more than a decade of experience, and likely report to an AVP/AVC.
 - **Mid-Level Managers:** Manage a unit or office, with a reporting line and considered an expert on that area; for the purposes of this study, women in these roles needed at least 10 years of experience. May report to senior-level staff.
- **University leadership:** Staff such as chancellors, presidents, or provosts, vice provosts or vice chancellors or presidents; also known as cabinet members. None of the participants in the study were part of this group of decision makers.

- **Inclusion:** Within education, the “practices, policies and processes” (Filippou et al., 2025, p. 3) that allow a student full rights to education including in and out of the classroom and limit their exclusion from access to the institution’s resources, thus rendering the goals of higher education obsolete.
- **Equity:** Within higher education, the understanding that though structural racism is intrinsically intertwined into systems, it needs to be dismantled through conscious strategies and a critical lens to allow for full participation of historically marginalized students in all institutional areas (Malcom-Piquex et al., 2016).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is broken up into six chapters. First is the introductory chapter, followed by the literature review. The literature review is broken down into understanding the theoretical framework of critical sensemaking, and then three topics: WOC in student affairs, free speech and inclusion, and staff campus climate. Chapter 3 focuses on methodology, including my epistemology, conceptual framing, and methodological approach. It includes participant outreach, data collection methods, and analysis processes, as well as basic participant descriptions. Next, Chapter 4 presents case descriptions of the WOC participants and provides additional context for their institutions. Chapter 5 includes findings, with data points from the participants. It also includes participant data sets and institutional portfolios. Chapter 6 shares a synthesis of those findings, presented as implications, along with conclusions. Chapter 7 offers recommendations, future research, a summary, and the dissertation conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explored relevant literature connected to women of color (WOC) leaders in student affairs managing this interplay and intertwined with the conceptual framework and themes of systems leadership. Specifically, it addressed content in three areas. First, I include literature about WOC in student affairs. Next, I cover the integration of literature on free speech and inclusion on college campuses. Finally, I incorporate literature on campus climate, focusing on staff experiences.

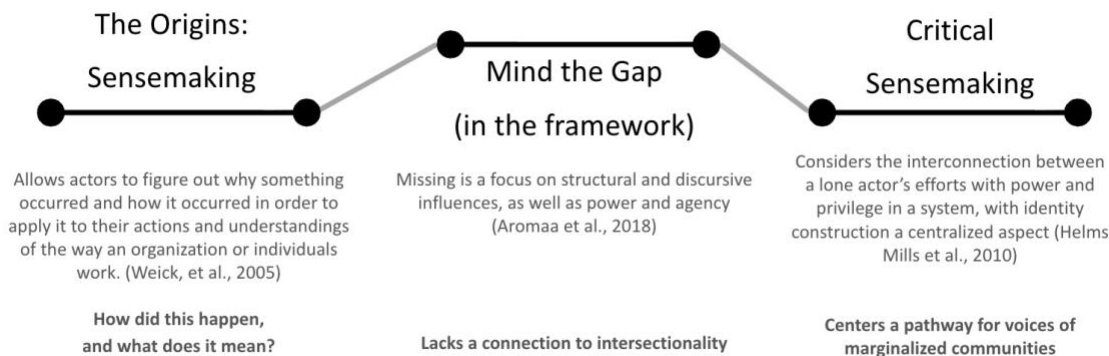
Theoretical Framework

This research was grounded in the theoretical framework of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010), which considers how to make meaning of an experience or incident with a critical lens. Sensemaking, a framework conceptualized in organizational theory, allows actors to retrospectively review occurrences, understand why and how something occurred, and apply this analysis to their actions (Weick et al., 2005), focusing on the interconnection of these concepts rather than each singularly. Simply put, it asks, How did this happen, and what does it mean? The phenomena tends to occur when there is a cognitive dissonance between actual and expected experiences, opening room for reflection and retrospection (Taylor & Williams, 2022). In the original framework, Weick (1995) included components such as identity construction and retrospection but lacked a critical lens or the consideration of power (Aromaa et al., 2018).

With this in mind, Helms Mills et al. (2010) offered that critical sensemaking considers the interconnection between a lone actor's efforts with power and privilege in a system alongside sensemaking. Helms Mills et al. offered that identity construction is one of the most foundational aspects of the framework, which deviates from Weick et al.'s (2005) assertion that all components of sensemaking are equally important. Additionally, Taylor and Williams (2022) contended power and privilege must examine both intersystem and intrasystem and noted the importance of embedding this practice to focus on marginalized people. This recommendation was central to the research questions of this dissertation, further connecting this framework to the research.

Helms Mills and Mills (2009) clarified that critical sensemaking also examines the embeddedness of processes in systems and society that affect people's examination of meaning-making. In giving this distinction, Helms Mills et al. (2010) created a pathway to center voices of marginalized communities in a conceptual framework. By doing this, critical sensemaking has revisited the sensemaking question of how something has happened and it means, but also added a lens of identity, power, and privilege. Figure 1 attempts to synthesize this information into a visual representation.

Figure 1
Visual Representation of Critical Sensemaking



Note. Figure created by author.

Through this framework, I examined how WOC leaders in student affairs use their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. These women self-identified as being committed to equitable practices and were in roles where they enacted free speech policies.

WOC in Student Affairs

Although no clear definition exists for WOC in student affairs, the history of the term WOC came from a political move by Black women to show solidarity with other ethnically marginalized women (Matos et al., 2021); the current research aimed to uphold those values by using the term. To understand the phrase WOC, it is essential to note it includes two distinct social identities: gender and race. The complexity of the interconnection of these two identities, in context with one another and understood through power dynamics, can best be understood by the word intersectionality. Importantly, this concept addresses how identities interact, integrate, and reciprocate (Pasque, 2014; Wijeyesinghe, 2021). The term was coined by Crenshaw (1991), but the concept has long been a topic of conversation among Black women historians and sociologists. Specifically, the current research was influenced by intersectionality, considering Pasque's (2014) guidance that neglecting intersectionality continues to perpetuate inequities.

Yet, a gap exists in research on women and staff of color in student affairs (Bazner, 2022; Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011), framing the invisibility of WOC in the field. This deficit in scholarship has been even more pronounced among WOC leaders. Thus, the focus of the remainder of this literature review was expanded to include all WOC in student affairs.

Exploring intersectionality in the workplace can best be understood by the work of Wijeyesinghe (2021), who explained the tensions that arise in consideration of social locations, where a person holding at least one marginalized identity and another privileged identity, takes on an ill-formed understanding of all other marginalized identities. This concept is similar to Accapadi's (2007) one-up/one-down identities, where white women lean into their marginalization as women but use their whiteness for power. Whiteness describes the denial of the presence of racism as being neutral in a pervasive and systemic manner (Boss & Bravo,

2020; Briscoe & Jones, 2022). Both studies spoke to how ignorance of intersectionality can contribute to the dismissiveness of the WOC experience. Another study by Comeaux et al. (2023) encouraged the use of intersectionality to reframe cultural competence to transformative cultural competence, moving from the floor-to-the-ceiling consideration of intertwining diversity practices in the field of student affairs. Though Accapadi's (2007) and Comeaux et al.'s work was specific to student affairs, they remained some of the few studies focused on intersectionality within the field. Influenced by that lack, intersectionality's use as a tool was encompassed in research inspired by Pasque's (2014) finding that centering intersectionality can erase campus climate stressors for WOC. This consideration of intersectionality also aligns with themes of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

It was essential to understand the field of student affairs in the context of intersectionality of WOC leaders, thereby considering how whiteness in student affairs applies to them and how gender prevents ascension, creating double marginalization. Briscoe and Jones (2022) also described universities as hesitant to speak about and address whiteness, leaving people of color to feel ignored and misunderstood. Though, at the time of this study, 71% of the entire field of student affairs was comprised of women, 51% of the field were white women (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). The same study reported men held 44% of student affairs leadership positions, which meant they had a 52% higher chance of ascension. These dynamics of a racialized glass ceiling have made it difficult for WOC in student affairs to thrive and ascend (Bazner, 2022; Pasque, 2014; Squire et al., 2023).

In considering intersectionality in the workplace for this research, it was important to understand research in higher education, too. Presidents, department chairs, professors, and chief academic officers include the collective of titles of women in higher education referenced in the American Council on Education (Johnson, 2017) infographic brief "Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership: An Update on Women in Higher Education," which purportedly accounted "key descriptive statistics on women in higher education" (p. 1). Resoundingly missing in this list and in ACE's entire report were any titles and references to women in student affairs, a significant and impactful sector of higher education. This instance revealed representative devaluation of student affairs within the higher education context. The ACE report's focus on the higher education sector did not mention dynamics of intersectionality or how power structures make a difference in these pipelines and pathways. The significant lack of research on WOC in student affairs (Bazner, 2022; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011) reflects their exclusion from leadership.

At the same time, WOC in the field have been exhausted because of racialized and emotional labor, racial battle fatigue, tokenization in the workplace, and a lack of appropriate recognition, particularly as they tend to be designated as the key staff in addressing free speech and inclusion incidents (Anderson, 2021; Maramba, 2011; Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021). Though they are key staff on the ground, they have had limited access to upper-level decision making. This could lead to a double standard and lack of agency for WOC compared to other staff. Bazner (2022) found these staff faced isolation due to the challenge of finding coconspirators and allies, their experience with racism from supervisors and supervisees, and the necessity of navigating these tensions along with responsibilities.

Discussing the emotional and mental struggles WOC face in student affairs is vital. They have faced gendered racial battle fatigue (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2023), where women face both

gendered and racialized emotional harm due to the constant need to combat racism and sexism. Bazner (2022) also discussed racialized labor, the designation of certain tasks to people of color. Rowe-Allen and Smith (2019) connected this concept to requests to manage activism and bias incidents and add a gendered lens. These forms of labor potentially keep them from other types of work where more decision making occurs, along with burnout where an emotional toll from work prevents accomplishing other professional goals (Quaye et al., 2024).

Anderson (2021) elevated burnout to a systemic level caused by university leadership not recognizing the institution's inequities. Ironically, if WOC leaders in student affairs do not conform to the racialized or gendered roles requested, they can face penalties within their organizations (Squire et al., 2023), such as being dismissed via a gendered or racial stereotype or passed over for promotion. Yet, Squire et al. (2023) also found WOC leaders in student affairs created more just positionalities when they engaged in emboldened questioning of norms and practiced nonconformity. Therefore, WOC may face a quandary to either conform to roles to have job security and access or push back against standards in service of equity.

Systems and resources are needed to support WOC in light of the unique challenges they face. Mentorship is important in belonging, inclusion, and retention (Martinez-Benyarko et al., 2022; Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019), as is serving as a mentor (Quaye et al., 2024). Pasque (2014) spoke to the need for mentorship for women in student affairs to learn, gain confidence and resilience, and advocate for professional and personal advice. Additionally, they need people like coconspirators and allies and counterspaces where they can process racism and emotional harm with other people with shared identities (Boss & Bravo, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Another resource for support is national professional organizations (Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021) that allow for interconnectivity and validation. Sánchez et al. (2021) also spoke to systemic changes such as institutional commitments to identity consciousness, including supervisor training. Quaye et al. (2024) emphasized the positionality of supervisors to uplift Black women educators to accept Black women's whole self. This idea could arguably transfer to an approach for all WOC. Finally, Accapadi (2007) and Boss and Bravo (2020) offered that white people (and those with positionality and power) should deeply reflect on those privileges in their approach and create dialogic spaces not only to explore their own whiteness but also its effect on a system.

The phrase WOC can be divisive (Niskodé-Dossett et al., 2011); however, both the phrase *woman of color* and the term intersectionality also encompass many identities, helping distinguish how systems affect these identities. Research from Maramba (2011), Quaye et al. (2024), and Sánchez et al. (2021) showed how different gendered ethnicities (i.e., Asian American Pacific Islander [AAPI] women, Black women, and Latina women, respectively) have both similarities and differences as students affairs WOC. All three articles discussed gendered racial battle fatigue, emotional labor, invisible labor (i.e., unseen work), and the experience of isolation for their participants. They also described invisibility and hypervisibility that manifested differently by ethnicity (Maramba, 2011; Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021). For example, for Black women, hypervisibility looks like being the race expert, and for AAPI women, it looks like the model minority. Invisibility for Latina women is a sense of nonbelonging, and for Black women, it is being the unqualified DEI candidate. Recognizing these differences was crucial to this research so as to, specifically, not group experiences of all WOC together.

The framework of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010) has provided a tool for WOC to discern toggling identities and potentially help clarify their understandings. One approach is to use critical sensemaking to interrogate and address coalition and camaraderie with other WOC (Taylor & Williams, 2022). Intersectionality, in fact, requires continual critical sensemaking as one acquires additional information about clear and present power dynamics. Blackhurst (2000), Howard-Hamilton and Williams (1996), and Pasque (2014) argued mentorship could be the solution to solve confusion on how to navigate the academy. Taylor and Williams (2022) offered engaging in critical sensemaking, as it is created for better understanding social dynamics. A remedy may manifest from a combination of mentorship, sensemaking, and the detangling of the embeddedness of racialized structures in the academy.

Free Speech and Inclusion on College Campuses

Commitments to both free expression and inclusion on campus have been seemingly at odds, confirming the work of Ben-Porath (2020). These complexities have been highlighted since 2023 as headlines declared colleges were both not adhering to free speech policies, but also harming students by not protecting them due to these policies. Free speech on college campuses curates and maintains impact on the student experience due to the societal and communal nature of college and tensions with inclusion (Ramlo, 2020; University of California Berkeley School of Law, 2024). Furthermore, the staff on the ground navigating this tension tend to be student affairs staff of color because they are tasked to handle it by university leadership (Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019). Statistically, those staff members are likely to be WOC. Foundational research has suggested a unilateral approach to navigating this dynamic, in particular amplifying the need to protect free speech at all costs, whereas more contemporary authors have offered critiques (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018; Moore & Bell, 2017; Palfrey, 2017; Vatts & Dutta, 2020), forming a spectrum from traditional to critical. The positionality of each group of authors deeply affected their work, including their races, genders, and scholarly perspectives.

The First Amendment guarantees a person's right to free speech (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018; Palfrey, 2017). However, limits exist for speech; unprotected speech can include incitement of violence, true threat, fighting words, and harassment (FIRE, 2024). Examples of these limits include (a) incitement of violence, when a speaker instructs an audience to engage in violent or illegal behavior; (b) true threat, when a speaker directs an audience to physically harm a certain group of people; (c) fighting words, when a person intends to deliberately provoke others into harming them; and (d) harassment, in a higher education context, when conduct is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it prevents another person or group from receiving an equal education. On college campuses, it is important to reference time, place, and manner (TPM), advanced in the terminology section of this dissertation. The formal conduct processes at universities address the violations of unprotected speech that incite physical violence or constitute harassment. However, psychological harm, which is deeply connected to bias, has not been considered a violation (LePeau et al., 2016).

Chemerinsky and Gilman (2018) and Palfrey (2017) argued free speech helped disenfranchised groups—citing the Civil Rights Movement as their prime example—and legal limits to free speech exist. Nonetheless, the First Amendment has been said to be harmful to marginalized groups (Ben-Porath, 2020; Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018; Palfrey, 2017). From an institutional standpoint, researchers have disagreed about limits on speech. In fact, Epstein et

al. (2024) found choosing individual rights over community needs for dignity resulted in a repressive legalism (i.e., the need to adhere to legal obligations), thereby dismissing humanizing and healing. At the same time, restricting speech could have a chilling effect that can harm students on a spectrum of views and diminish viewpoint diversity; universities need to be mindful of this issue (Combs, 2018).

Although the chilling effect has been seen as chilling conservative voices, more recently, research has shown marginalized voices were chilled as well. Specifically, the Palestinian exception to free speech emphasized the repressions of exercising speech on this topic (Ahmed & Key, 2024; Palestine Legal, 2015). Epstein et al. (2024) and Moses (2021) contended all viewpoints are unnecessary, especially if they are not truthful. Interestingly, Vats and Dutta (2020) argued, in an ideal world, TPM restrictions treat all groups equally when applied neutrally; however, because marginalized students have not had the same access as students from dominant groups, TPM constraints have been inherently inequitable. Moore and Bell (2017) asserted countering speech with more speech does not recognize inherent racism. If critical sensemaking is applied in this context, the emphasis on discursive structure and power differentials would likely consider the same conclusions. However, both Chemerinsky and Gillman (2018) and Palfrey (2017) established free speech absolutism as the gold standard. Again, using the framework of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010) to analyze the dissent to foundational research can illuminate how intersectionality, power, and context influence how these authors consider counter-speech. In fact, Ben-Porath (2020) stated countering speech with more speech “fails to recognize power differences” (p. 9).

Using a critical lens can start to pivot how universities contend with free speech. Ben-Porath (2020) suggested inclusive freedom, a conceptual framework that promotes free expression and inclusive practices in an institution. Moore and Bell (2017) asserted, in contrast, the university is inherently racist, denying marginalized students equal access to education by allowing harmful speech. Their idea encourages universities to not give equal weight to all ideas. Essentially, their argument is higher education institutions loosely couple, or do not couple at all, racist free speech from the historical oppression of the United States, even though it is a tightly coupled system (Weick, 1976). Jones’s (n.d.) popular quotation, “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist” (para. 1) concurred with Moses (2021) and Variotta (1997) who noted the importance of centralizing humanity in dialogue. These points showcased how academic freedom has been used solely to promote unprotected speech when it could also be used to consider inclusive speech.

Moore and Bell (2017), Motala (2021), and Vats and Dutta (2020) argued the 14th Amendment, which requires equal protection under the law, should be institutionalized alongside the First Amendment. Doing so would allow for a response to speech that harms protected classes. However, universities have explicitly declined to interpret and regulate discipline and other policies with this in mind. Using the framework of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010), it is possible to infer that intersectionality, power, and privilege are not considered in these institutions’ decision making. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin by any universities that receive federal funding (Soucek, 2023; University of California Berkeley School of Law, 2024), which comes to a head with free speech. Soucek (2023) succinctly framed this issue as the “double

liability dilemma,” as institutions are “liable if they regulate or even respond to hostile speech on campus, and liable if they don’t” (p. 683).

Considerations for how decisions about free speech and inclusion affect staff job responsibilities paint a meaningful picture. Chemerinsky and Gillman (2018) and Palfrey (2017) insisted the answer to hate speech is for students, staff, and administrators to use counter-speech. This concept is juxtaposed with the Kalven Committee’s Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action, which argued for the need for universities to pledge neutrality as a way to uphold the First Amendment (Kalven Committee, 1967; University of California Berkeley School of Law, 2024). Though the Kalven Report was held at a systemic level, the implications trickled down, creating contrast and confusion about staff roles, such as when administrators and staff should speak and when not. Additionally, Miller et al. (2018a) found student affairs professionals expressed free speech response was a top complexity of their work.

Research needs to be done to learn about the impact and effect of free speech policies on marginalized staff, both directly and through their implementation for students. Miller et al. (2018b) found staff felt accountable to students when responding to bias incidents. Further research should investigate how that accountability (and, possibly, pressure) affects staff well-being. LePeau et al. (2016) found staff who responded to harmful speech should make five considerations in their systems approach to helping students: ensuring the response is targeted party driven, it is transparent, it is educational, there is an individual and a systemic response, and there is self-reflection. Another best practice involves leveraging relationships and collaboration among staff (Accapadi & Miller, 2023).

A concept to consider is the exclusion of WOC in student affairs from leadership decisions with the lens of creating, reviewing, and implementing free speech policies. For example, Moore and Bell (2017) stated university administrators used neoliberal rhetoric to consider their approach to campus free speech policies and statements. That approach often involved a marketplace of ideas to allow for rigorous debate and discussion, assuming everyone is on an equitable playground of access. However, as critical sensemaking of the various opinions and research on free speech practices has contended, that equitable access may not exist. This poses the question of how free speech policies can exist on campus while considering all populations equitably.

Finally, it is important to consider how equity-minded student affairs staff interact with free speech. Agua and Pendukar (2019) and Duran-Leftin and Duran (2021) presented some guidelines. Agua and Pendukar emphasized the absence of staff having academic freedom, which diminishes their autonomy and limits how and when they can voice their opinions; the authors distinguished this from the faculty experience. Notably, as of late 2025, even faculty academic freedom was under attack (Weingarten, 2025). Duran-Leftin and Duran suggested sensemaking as a tool to discern and understand free-speech policies, centering the framework’s use of power in systems with reflection. Both sets of authors also cited tempered radicals, a term coined by Meyerson and Scully (1995) that refers to people who work quietly to challenge established beliefs within an organization and slowly recalibrate them. This framework may serve as a tool for WOC in student affairs to navigate their positionality and experiences. Miller et al. (2018a) and LaPeau et al. (2016) used systems thinking to navigate free speech. Each suggested making opaque processes more transparent and giving staff more

social capital. These offerings certified the need for systems leaders to consider WOC leaders beyond their individual capacities.

From this literature review, it was clear free speech and inclusion have continued to grow, change, and develop on college campuses, compelling deep reflection, nuanced understanding, and the need for clear direction. The literature review sparked the need to consider a name for this interaction; thus, moving forward, this research used interplay to consider these tensions. Specifically, interplay means enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside an individual's own equity and inclusion values. This research considered the interplay of law and policy, the effect on WOC student affairs leaders, and the potential of equity-minded professionals using their skills to finesse the interplay between free speech and inclusion.

Staff Campus Climate

College campuses produce complex environments, with no two campuses alike. However, as P. H. Collins (1993) stated, "Colleges where a modified version of the plantation as a metaphor for the institutional dimension of oppression survives" (p. 32). The idea is affirmed by Weise et al.'s (2023) idea of "(cis)heteropatriarchal violence is woven in the structural fabric of higher education" (p. 616). In other words, though institutions vary, a through line is they are inherently white, patriarchal, cis- and heteronormative spaces. This concept suggests campus climate is embedded in an institution based on the dominant culture, and everyone in that system adopts it. Institutions inherently reproduce inequity (Hurtado et al., 2012), and, in systems thinking, they are products of their own practices. Limited research exists on student affairs staff climate (Briscoe, 2022); therefore, the following section focuses on staff campus climate. It should be noted the connectedness of student campus climate to the experiences of student affairs staff is undeniable, as they are interwoven particularly in regard to compositional diversity (Garcia, 2016). Furthermore, most campus climate research has focused on racial campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1998); therefore, this section of the literature also mimics that standard.

The foundational work on campus climate is Hurtado's (1992) *The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict*. The most common definition of campus climate is how students, faculty members, and staff understand and navigate the institution's perceptions, attitudes, and expectations, considering the environments, policies, and services and their interplay (Hurtado et al., 1998). Campus climate has four components: historical legacy, its structural diversity, the psychological climate, and the behavioral dimension (Hurtado et al., 1998). I categorized the interplay of free speech and inclusion in the last component.

Hurtado et al.'s (1998) foundational research stated multiple factors created racial tensions on campus; however, their research was initiated to address campus bias incidents, one of the components of the interplay. The multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) is a framework by Hurtado et al. (2012), building off their previous models and incorporating responses to criticism. It centers social identity and the student experience, specifically including both curricular and cocurricular aspects, as well as the faculty and staff responsible for those aspects. In effect, the work of student affairs staff is woven into the framework. Additionally, this framework also includes a "socio-historical context" and "community context and external commitments" (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 48) to emphasize a holistic approach to campus climate. Resoundingly important, a positive campus climate is one

of the most impactful predictors of successful, equitable student outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2012; Koo, 2021).

Abrica et al. (2023) presented a strong critique of campus climate frameworks, arguing campus climate heuristics do not address power and privilege and, therefore, cannot advance justice. They further scrutinized the word climate in that its use delegitimizes the actualities of these interactions in comparing it to literal weather, and doing so does not address tensions, complexities, and individualities (Abrica et al., 2023). Furthermore, Abrica et al. emphasized the use of these frameworks encourages replication without context, referring to the systems thinking concept of memetic isomorphism and qualifying the necessity of systems thinking in this work. Given the validity of this critique, for the current research, the consideration of context and nuance, alongside power and privilege and systems thinking, was used to continue to use campus climate as a framework.

It is important to note the reciprocal impact of campus climate and student affairs staff, on both themselves and students. Research has shown providing dedicated staff in student affairs, along with community centers, helps to enact supportive environments for students (Budge et al., 2020; Weise et al., 2023). Notably, serving in roles where they support students with similar identities helps staff to feel inclusion and belonging (Garcia, 2016). Recent anti-DEI legislation across several states in the United States (Currier, 2024) has already and could negate this work in the future, harming students and educators in the field of student affairs. Even though previous research proved the vitality of cultural centers (Hurtado et al., 1998), states such as Florida, Texas, Ohio, and others have closed them, with many student affairs staff losing their jobs (Saul, 2024). As the Trump administration has continued to exercise its power, more student-facing staff have lost their jobs with uncertainty in the future of the effects on campuses (Moody, 2025), affecting the climate on campus for all community members.

Historically, campus climate studies focused on students and far less on faculty and staff (Hurtado et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2006). Research on staff acculturation and understanding of campus climate is lacking, especially concerning the experiences of WOC in student affairs. However, few studies have spoken to the experiences of staff when considering campus climate. Davis et al. (2020) published a study focused on community college where it was found that staff have the power to shape an organization's culture, including the culture of students. Culture is a product of climate, with Sánchez et al. (2021) attributing culture to experiences. Additionally, a climate for staff that includes shared leadership with faculty and affirmation of positivity correlates with student success and belonging (Davis et al., 2020). This climate also allows for leadership experience by uplifting staff voices into decision making (Howard-Hamilton & Williams, 1996; Squire et al., 2023). Finally, staff allies have been important in creating a positive climate for both other staff and students, particularly when identities overlap (Hurtado et al., 2012; LePeau et al., 2016). This concept confirmed the need for staff to see themselves represented in various facets of the university to feel they belong.

At universities, marginalized staff, especially staff of color and women, have tended to experience more harm compared to other groups (Hurtado et al., 1998; Mayhew et al., 2006). Thus, evidence and experience have clearly shone a light on the stark experiences of WOC staff clearly embedded in their campus systems. Campus climate exists not only in the system of the entirety of campus but also in its subsystems (e.g., divisions of student affairs, subdivisions, and/or units within those), all of which impact marginalized staff (Garcia, 2016). Garcia (2016)

found student affairs professionals need to serve compositionally diverse students, work in a compositionally diverse unit, and have a support system that affirms their identities. Another study found many white staff approached bias incidents as “business as usual” (Briscoe, 2022, p. 565), while staff of color needed to process with other staff of color. Systems thinking provides an understanding that structure generates behavior (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.). Based on these studies, it could be argued climate generates culture; when the climate is harmful, culture for WOC can be toxic. This toxicity can harm the well-being, mental state, and labor of WOC in student affairs.

Another aspect that affects campus climate are the laws and policies that exist at federal and state levels, particularly those concerning free speech, the policies of which student affairs staff tend to administer. Under the First Amendment, all public universities in the United States, and private universities in California, cannot discipline students using protected speech (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018). In the context of campus climate, this law presents a conundrum, as students experience psychological harm from instances of protected speech. This experience could lead to those targeted students feeling less included when they ask the university to respond and it cannot. The etymology of the word *policy*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), takes root from both Latin and Greek and connects to citizenship, with historical overlap in usage with the word *police*. This definition begets the question of citizenship for and policing of whom. Combined with the idea that colleges were built historically for white, land-owning, heterosexual, Christian men and excluded all others (P. H. Collins, 1993; Hurtado et al., 2012; Weise et al., 2023), it seems like the policies were meant to keep these same groups from equal access. Research has shown some recent policies benefitted marginalized groups. Inclusive policies fostered strong support for marginalized students, allowing for more positive experiences (Budge et al., 2020).

Kezar et al. (2024) argued campus climate can also be a more actionable way to make change. Their research built a framework called ecological validation based on a holistic outlook, integrated learning, asset minded, and identity-conscious support. It seemed as if Kezar et al. applied critical sensemaking to foundational models of campus climate to add layers of identity and deconstruct limits to power to create a functional campus climate tool. Though geared toward students, this powerful tool could be tweaked to measure the experience of student affairs WOC leaders’ experiences with campus climate.

Universities and colleges are complex systems. Retooling them for positive campus climates requires short- and long-term strategic thinking (Hurtado et al., 1998); acknowledging the difficulty of this at various levels is paramount. To create thriving campuses centered on inclusion, an institutional strategic commitment is required alongside effective system-level campus climate interventions that staff can implement to move institutions toward equity. Institutional agents are individuals with the capacity and commitment to directly or indirectly transmit institutional knowledge and resources to students (Hurtado et al., 2012). The work of institutional agents was a core component of Hurtado et al.’s (2021) research. Scholars have provided varying solutions on how to approach the creation of thriving campuses, centered on equity. One suggestion is to embody the tenets of tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), slowly working to change a system from within with concerted strategy. Another is through relational strategy with governing boards (Morgan et al., 2022), empowering student affairs staff to leverage governing boards to elevate their voices. Still, other researchers have

approached this work with a systems focus, requiring institutions to address whiteness (Briscoe et al., 2022) and work to slowly dismantle it at the systems level by naming it, working against it, and validating staff of color. Finally, both Leath et al. (2021) and Agua and Pendakur (2019) suggested advocating for the student voice, though they differed in their approaches. Due to the inherent connection between student voice and student affairs staff, this seems a powerful approach to shifting institutional campus climate.

Conclusion

It is important to consider how this research informs systems thinking in education. Research has shown higher education institutions take time to make changes (Hurtado et al., 1998) and systems thinking acknowledges leaders think slowly, establishing the two to be intertwined. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ACE defined a vital collegiate learning environment as one in which freedom of expression is protected while also ensuring civility is affirmed, all individuals are valued, equal access is minted, and well-being is supported (Rankin & Reason, 2008). At the same time, Yakaboski and Donahoo (2011) stated how the roles of WOC leaders maneuver in multidirectional paths; yet, institutional decision makers exclude them (Moore & Bell, 2017). In considering their intersectional identities and their roles managing free speech policies, practicing inclusivity, and shaping systems, their influence in leadership decisions could impact systems on campus to achieve this ideal environment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This descriptive study examined how women of color (WOC) leaders in student affairs, who managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. The interplay of free speech and inclusion, sometimes solely referred to as interplay, was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities.

The following four research questions were developed for the current study:

1. In regard to the interplay of free speech and inclusion, how does the campus climate of the institutions of women of color leaders affect their role?
2. What precursors assist women of color leaders in student affairs in understanding and approaching the interplay of free speech and inclusion?
3. How do women leaders of color in student affairs navigate the interplay of free speech and inclusion?
4. What institutional commitments enhance women of color leaders' managements of the interplay of free speech and inclusion?

This chapter is organized as follows: the rationale for this research approach, followed by the research setting and context, a description of the research sample and data sources, including collection, and the data analysis methods. These sections are followed by issues of trustworthiness, limitations and delimitations, and a summary.

Rationale for Research Approach

Methodology examines the process of research and is molded by how a researcher reviews, understands, and interprets data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In other words, "the systems of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform your research—is part of your design" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39). The rationale for research is thereby embedded in these concepts and broken down into the following sections: epistemology and ontology, conceptual framing, and methodological approach.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is one's understanding of how the world works (Maxwell, 2013). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized centering philosophy in creating the basis of criteria for any qualitative research. Two philosophical approaches resonated with the ontological approach for the current study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) contended that constructionism upholds the idea that multiple meanings can be simultaneously valid. This occurs through engagement in the realities of the world and human interaction (Crotty, 1998; Maxwell, 2013). Simultaneously, a transformative philosophy centers social justice and examines oppressive practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, transformative frameworks include acknowledging the existence of numerous paths of knowledge attainment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Glesne, 2011). Given the current study centered on understanding WOCs' experiences, it was imperative that positionality and power were part of those social justice and oppressive practices acknowledged and applied.

Epistemology is how one gains information (Maxwell, 2013). A simple way of thinking about this is how an individual understands what knowledge is (Crotty, 1998). Some use logic and reason to provide that data, and others acquire it through experience and intuition. The latter were the backbone of this study as it centered the narratives of WOC leaders in student

affairs. Additionally, as a student affairs professional, I used my own experience as a layer of epistemology.

Critical philosophies, including those where life is influenced by social structures (Glesne, 2011), also influenced the methods. One such approach may be critical advocacy inquiry, which examines historical roots and lived realities (Carducci & Pasque, 2025). Interestingly, critical advocacy also includes components of transformative approach, one of my philosophical assumptions. When ontologies and epistemologies are cross-referenced and indexed, they create paradigms and interpretive frameworks that inform the methodology. Thus, the research was framed to support multiple interpretations, center human interaction and social justice, and substantiate intuition, all as valid approaches.

Conceptual Framing

This research was grounded in the theoretical framework of critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010), which considers how to make meaning of an experience or incident with a critical lens that explores power dynamics and positionality. Sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) focuses on the interconnection of these concepts rather than each singularly. Sensemaking tends to occur when there is a cognitive dissonance between actual and expected experiences, opening room for reflection and retrospection (Taylor & Williams, 2022). For the purpose of this research, critical sensemaking could be applied as a tool to understanding the interplay of free speech and inclusion, given research has shown these two ideas can feel in opposition of one another (Ben-Porath, 2020). The ontological and epistemological roots of this research intertwined with the conceptual framework, specifically with considerations of a transformative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) that centered social justice and was rooted in lived experiences. Additionally, critical sensemaking includes identity construction and considers intersectionality or power (Aromaa et al., 2018). Considering the focus on WOC, intersectionality was a lens threaded in many parts of this research.

Methodological Approach

Bloomberg (2023) reminded researchers that qualitative research is not created to postulate findings applicable for every person in every situation, but rather to gather information and analyze it so it speaks to the specific context and can be generalized thematically to help understand an area. I considered various methodologies; however, with the specificities in design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I did not believe they aligned with my goals. Thus, I decided to partake in a descriptive, or basic interpretive, qualitative research (Tisdell et al., 2025). Sometimes considered a more basic approach in qualitative research, Sandelowski (2000) argued the simplicity of the design allows for a more comprehensive approach and allows researchers to be closer to the data. It is accessible and naturalistic, allowing for researcher flexibility in methods (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). This supports Tisdell et al.'s (2025) description as one of the most common types of qualitative research, particularly in education research. I felt this approach aligned with my epistemology and ontology.

My design embedded a descriptive study with constructivist and transformative philosophical approaches. This design process encumbers paths for multiple meanings and multiple paths to achieve those meanings by simply centering meaning making experiences or phenomena (Tisdell et al., 2025). By rooting itself in the deep, thick, and rich descriptions, it centers the participants, having the researcher focus on data collection strategies (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). In my study, this approach allowed me to focus on the facts as presented by

the WOC leaders. Sandelowski (2000) stated this approach prevents a researcher from putting forward their “own interpretative spin” (p. 336). Descriptive research also allows for the synthesis of several participants who have similar lived experiences (Tisdell et al., 2025). It seemed to imply an individual could hold multiple standpoints and imply the holding of differing viewpoints from participants.

Specifically, a descriptive study includes three elements, according to Tisdell et al. (2025): (a) developing questions dependent on the theoretical framework and the study’s purpose; (b) finding reoccurring motifs; and (c) the role of the researcher, gathering data, and interpreting through the lens of the person researching. I followed these steps to design my research. I decided my data needed to be drawn from interviews because they allowed for the most comprehensive and descriptive ideas to be shared (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). Next, I developed interview questions that embedded concepts from my theoretical framework of critical sensemaking, which directly aligned with the purpose of descriptive research to “understand and describe how people make sense of their lives and experiences” (Tisdell et al., 2025, p. 29). This alignment further reified the utility of this specific design.

Then, I gathered data via interviews, allowing me to learn the core essence and form or what Sandelowski (2000) outlined as the direction of descriptive studies. Finally, I synthesized and analyzed the data as both a researcher and practitioner. I paid particular attention to accurate interpretation of the robust descriptions. Sandelowski noted the unique relevance of the practitioner role in this research. Further details of the data collection and analysis are outlined in the following sections. Together, my framework of critical sensemaking and this basic descriptive qualitative design set the foundation for the methods and provided a clear and interconnected approach to this research.

Research Setting and Context

Several factors contributed to designing the research setting and context for the current study. This research was conducted with WOC working at multiple institutions across the country rather than solely from one state or region or one institution, allowing for a wider reach of rich data coming from women and institutions. This approach tied to the ontological approach of allowing for multiple meanings to be valid (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Though ample times exist in history when free speech has been under attack, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in October 2023 and the 2024 election of Trump to his second term amplified the targeting of free speech during the time of this study, in particular, with a ban on race-conscious admissions; diminishing of programs for marginalized communities; academic freedom; and time, place, and manner (TPM) policies. I specifically wanted to understand how interplay was managed in this heightened context.

Additionally, state, regional, and historical context shaped climate (Hurtado, 1992), recognizing the important role each WOC’s institution help set specific context for them and the data they shared. Identities and intersectionality of the roles of WOC participants in this study remained at the helm and it was important to understand those experiences from a variety of backgrounds and factors that influenced them, alongside geo-political connections to where these women resided. Relatedly, Sánchez et al. (2021) referenced the impact of culture on experiential understanding, championing drawing from multiple experiences. I included both public and private institutions to expand scope and wanted to understand if there would be differences for institutional type.

Research Sample and Data Sources

Participant criteria included WOC leaders working in student affairs, or a similar field, either in a director-manager, senior-level staff, or assistant or associate vice presidents or vice provosts (AVPs) or assistant or associate vice chancellors (AVCs) roles. All participants needed at least 10 years of full-time experience in student affairs. WOC referred to Asian American, including East and Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islanders (AAPI); Black/African/African American; Latina/Hispanic; Native American, Alaskan Native, and/or Indigenous; South Asian, Southwest Asian, and North African (SSWANA); and mixed-race women. The use of SSWANA allowed for two distinctions: (a) it decolonized (i.e., removed a Western-centric lens) the ethnic groups typically referred to as Middle Eastern and defined as white in the U.S. Census and shifted them to the SSWANA umbrella, combining them with South Asians, and (b) stratified ethnic groups under the AAPI umbrella. In a cursory review of journal articles, most references to WOC beyond Black women were limited. A goal of this research was to diversify and include a more expansive representation of WOC's experiences. The research was open to anyone identifying as a woman, a commitment to transinclusivity.

The participants were recruited from private or public, 4-year institutions across the United States. This allowed for a purposeful and maximum sampling (Maxwell, 2013) of women leaders in these positions and a better understanding of dynamics across institution types, wherein the women were intentionally selected based on these characteristics to represent the breadth and depth of the characteristics. Finally, the participant criteria included two professional experiences: (a) holding a self-determined commitment to equity and (b) managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion among college students. The justification of these components centered on conceptual framing to have participants speak through experience (Mills & Gay, 2019).

Data Collection Procedures

Recruitment emails and social media posts (see Appendices A and B) were shared through personal and professional networks to attract potential WOC leaders in student affairs to this study. Given my role as a practitioner with 20+ years in the field, this network was robust. Sharing within a network allowed participants to identify their own participation, centering participant autonomy and limiting pressure that could come from direct outreach (Bloomberg, 2023). Additionally, one participant was recruited through snowball sampling, wherein a participant identified another participant (Mills & Gay, 2019). Interested participants filled out a consent form, followed by a demographic form. Purposive sampling strategy, sometimes called criterion sampling specifically, where participants who meet certain criteria are elicited to participate (Bloomberg, 2023; Mills & Gay, 2019), was administered.

Creswell and Poth (2018) offered purposive sampling integrates well with qualitative research as it allows researchers to center unique and individualized experiences of a certain phenomenon. Specifically, this study used a demographic form (see Appendix C) with predetermined questions to assess these data, which were used for screening. Participants were required to meet all of the selection criteria, described previously in the introduction to this section. The first priority was to allow as much representational distribution across WOC (e.g., their races and ethnicities) as possible. Additionally, institution type, professional administrative experience, number of years, institution type, and region were all considered. After reviewing the demographic form, public LinkedIn profiles were reviewed to verify their

authenticity. Only 10 candidates were elicited to join the study, with all 10 committing to and fully completing the study.

Each selected subject participated in a semistructured 60-minute interview (see Appendix D), using audio recording and embedded transcript renderings. Semistructured interviews met the goals of descriptive qualitative research that allowed for meaning making (Tisdell et al., 2025). Additionally, semistructured interviews allowed participants to lead their own narratives and allowed for some symmetry across interviews as a form of validation (Maxwell, 2013). During the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss their experience as WOC leaders in student affairs who managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion on their campuses. Each participant was able to review and clarify points on their transcripts. My final step was to partake in reflexivity, in which my biases were curtailed by understanding what was informing their interpretations of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was done through use of voice-to-text memos to help me collect thoughts, name positionality, and dissect reflections. These notes were reviewed and reflected on throughout the research process. Additional memos were created as ideas or reflections emerged for me. Originally, the study was designed for six to eight people but due to the quality of candidates, it was expanded and reapproved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Berkeley, to include up to 10 participants.

Description of Participants

Ten women participated in the study. Ladson-Billings (2025) postulated Western thought has influenced both quantitative and qualitative research with the need to include large sample sizes and argued rich and powerful data can be produced even from smaller sizes, allowing for a wide array of stories to be shared and by ensuring data represent marginalized voices. Thus, this research focused on a small sample size that included representational diversity. Data collected from the demographic form and supplemented by the interview are included in Table 1. More details about each participant are included in the case descriptions in Chapter 4.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Administrative level	Years in student affairs	Campus activism and protest in portfolio
Claudia	Latina	Cisgender	Did not share	Senior Level	20–25	Yes
Danielle	Black	Did not share	Pansexual	Senior Level	20–25	Yes
Neelima	SSWANA	Did not share	Heterosexual	AVP/AVC	20–25	Yes
Cassandra	Latina	Cisgender	Heterosexual	Senior Level	20–25	No
Savita	SSWANA	Cisgender	Queer	AVP/AVC	20–25	Yes
Sarena	AAPI	Cisgender	Heterosexual	AVP/AVC	25+	Yes
Malini	SSWANA	Did not share	Did not share	Director	10–15	No
Keisha	Indigenous	Did not share	Heterosexual	Director*	10–15	No
Nia	Black	Cisgender	Heterosexual	AVP/AVC	15–20	No
Avery	AAPI	Cisgender	Queer/Bisexual	AVP/AVC*	25+	Yes

Note. *Participants were in interim positions.

Participants included two AAPI women, two Black women, two Latina women, one Indigenous woman, and three SSWANA women. Six of the participants openly identified as cisgender; the other participants did not share how they identified. However, no woman referenced transgender as part of their identity. Three of the women identified as part of the LGBT+ community; two did not share their sexual orientation. All the women identified as either able-bodied or did not specifically identify as disabled. In research considering intersectionality, centering all identities, especially marginalized ones was key. Bedolla (2014) contended profound and impactful transformation at an institution can occur when all marginalized identities are considered in their totality. Thus, it was important to consider all marginalized identities participants shared in the study. Other marginalized identities are described in Chapter 4.

Professionally, five of the women were at the AVP/AVC level, three were at the senior level, and two were director-managers. Not all the participants worked directly in divisions of student affairs, but all did student affairs type work. Two had 25 years of experience or more, five had 20–25 years of experience, one had 19 years of experience, and the remaining two had just completed 10 years. Six oversaw direct response to campus activism and protest as part of their current functional area in regard to the interplay of free speech and inclusion, whereas the four others engaged in the interplay of free speech and inclusion in other ways, though many still contributed to the institution's protest response. Most participants had backgrounds in education, with either master's degrees or doctorates, or both. The data represented a varied sample of WOC along with a varied sampling of roles in student affairs, seemingly connecting to the research goals.

Five women worked at institutions in the Pacific region of the United States, two worked in the Southwest, one worked in the Southeast, and two worked in the Northeast. For a breakdown of U.S. geographical regions used in this study, refer to a map in Appendix D. Six public institutions and four private institutions were represented in the study. Six institutions were in urban settings, three in suburban areas, and one in a rural area. Three universities served less than 20,000 students, four served between 20,000–40,000 students, and the other three served student populations greater than 40,000. All population sizes were rounded to these figures. Finally, four institutions were in states that voted for Trump in the 2024 election and six were in states that voted for Harris (CNN, 2025). All these factors were considered in the analysis given the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) framework that includes political, social, historical, and structural elements, among others, to paint a robust picture of campus climate (Hurtado et al., 2012) across different institutions and contexts. This information is included in Table 2. More detailed information about these institutions can be found in Chapter 4 in the site overviews. Additional information about MMDLE is provided in Chapter 2.

Table 2
Institution Demographics

Pseudonym	Institution pseudonym	Institution type	Region	Setting	Student population	State 2024 presidential election results
Claudia	Little Burd State University (LBSU)	Public	Pacific	Suburban	20K–40K	Blue
Danielle	Juniper University (JU)	Private	Southwest	Urban	≤ 20K	Blue
Neelima	The Paddy State University (PSU)	Public	Pacific	Suburban	40K+	Blue
Cassandra	Eucalyptus University (EU)	Private	Pacific	Suburban	≤ 20K	Blue
Savita	Magnolia University (MU)	Private	Southeast	Urban	≤ 20K	Red
Sarena	True American State University (TASU)	Public	Pacific	Urban	40K+	Blue
Malini	Oak Tree University (his)	Private	Northeast	Urban	20K–40K	Red
Keisha	State University of Monajjar (SUM)	Public	Southwest	Urban	20K–40K	Red
Nia	Whitlock State University (WSU)	Public	Northeast	Rural	40K+	Red
Avery	Gofish State University (GSU)	Public	Pacific	Urban	20K–40K	Blue

Note. Blue = voted for Harris. Red = voted for Trump. *Detailed information about these institutions can be found in Chapter 4.

Once the participants were selected, a cursory review of their institution websites was done to gather demographic information. Factors were described in previous sections. Some of the institutions were minority-serving institutions, “institutions that have a compositionally diverse student body” (Garcia, 2016, p. 21). However, this information was not shared to protect anonymity. The data on institutions are shared in Table 2. Detailed information about these institutions can be found in Chapter 4 in the site overviews. For a breakdown of U.S. geographical regions used in this study, refer to Appendix E.

Ethical Considerations

It was important to consider the ethical impacts of this study on the participants. As with all research, there was a chance that confidentiality could have been compromised and or data breached; however, I took all the precautions to minimize this risk. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to allow for anonymity and uphold confidentiality. Institutional pseudonyms were also delineated. In the transcriptions and data analysis phase, no identifying information from the subjects was recorded that could be linked to the data. The study data were handled as confidentially as possible. According to Boss and Bravo (2020), confidentiality should not be limited to participants’ names, but also include the other details that could serve as identifiers. This idea was extremely important to me, and I held it in highest regard. The only people with access to the data were me and the sponsoring faculty. Additionally, all discussions and information shared during the interview was kept confidential and all identifiers were

removed from the interview data. Finally, careful review of extraneous details was done to ensure identities were kept confidential.

Some of the interview questions about practitioners' experiences related to the intersection of free speech and inclusion may have made them feel uncomfortable or upset, perhaps triggering experiences of pain or emotional distress. Though reflecting on their views and experiences was expected to be a minimal distress, participants were assured they could decline to answer any questions they did not want to or to stop the interview at any time. These protection methods for this research were approved by the University of California, Berkeley Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis Procedures

A structured data analysis process was applied to develop findings. Qualitative research is rooted in ensuring a researcher removes their bias and presumptions of participants (Tisdell et al., 2025); memoing was done as a commitment to the methodology whereby I reflected on my positionality in the interview (Bloomberg, 2023). In these memos, I documented interpretations, roles, and dynamics during the interview. Subsequently, each interview transcript, generated by Otter.ai was read several times, both to correct small transcription errors and to allow me to start to learn more about the participant and begin to uncover underlying patterns and connections. Using Saldaña (2013) as a reference, I reviewed the research questions to refresh the foundational purpose of the research. I also reviewed the transcripts, highlighting key words that repeatedly appeared, impactful quotations, and phrases connected to the literature review or that seemed powerful. Finally, I reviewed data, codes, and findings from a pilot study to help lay a foundation for understanding and interpreting the new data.

Bloomberg (2023) defined inductive coding as coding driven by the data, allowing a researcher to parse through the data and draw out themes, and can include emerging and predetermined codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, Tisdell et al. (2025) offered, in a descriptive qualitative study, data analysis is inductive and comparative; thus, it made sense to use inductive coding techniques to align these concepts.

Codes were developed using both conceptual and relational analysis (i.e., how often an idea was shown in the data and how these ideas interrelated; Bloomberg, 2023). Additionally, coding is a cyclical process (Saldaña, 2013). Thus, I reread and reviewed the transcripts, finding new topics, themes, and ideas to expand the list and create themes and subthemes again, eventually fitting into overarching parent or child codes. Additionally, I created keywords that might fit the data and coded the data using those words, an analytic strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All these ideas were made into a list and then grouped into overarching themes or subthemes; essentially, what Maxwell (2013) referred to as compiling. I developed a hierarchical coding frame (Saldaña, 2013), giving the same value to each code at each level, but allowing for differential levels. Codes were tested using MaxQDA, but most themes were derived from manual review and coding of transcripts.

Finally, I considered my theoretical framework of critical sensemaking to understand how the developed codes were guided by a deep analysis of why something happened and how it occurred with a lens of power and privilege. I wanted to ensure this framework was used to develop codes, infusing ideas from the literature and scholarship into my thematic analysis. For

example, one of the developed codes included a reference to critical sensemaking; other codes alluded to it. Both drew from direct participant data.

Summarily, the transcripts were analyzed inductively to determine the emergent themes and subthemes, making interpretations and connections with the existing critical sensemaking framework. From these, a codebook was created, as a central reference, with child codes, parent codes, definitions, and potential themes, which became the findings. Information was input into a tab on a spreadsheet. After each iteration, a new tab was created and the themes were recoded or rearranged; this action was also considered memoing as described by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Trustworthiness

Throughout this process, it was necessary to consider researcher bias, which could skew data analysis procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Practices such as memoing; consultancies; and revisiting transcripts, codes, themes, literature, and research questions, helped to mitigate that lens. This methodology was embedded in the concept of data triangulation by which data were confirmed by gathering it from multiple participants (Bloomberg, 2023). Once I triangulated the data several times, I considered the range of participants and redundancy of answers, or data saturation (Mills & Gay, 2019). Bloomberg (2023) stated a researcher's epistemology, philosophical approaches, and understanding, alongside the research components, can determine saturation. This concept was also interwoven with a research goal of a diverse representation across ethno-racial groups.

Before the codes and themes were finalized, several practitioner-scholars reviewed a portion of a transcript with the codebook to see if they came up with similar codes. Where differences existed, the group discussed, resolved, modified, and recoded transcripts as necessary. Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to this process as interrater reliability and believed it strengthens data analysis. Additionally, consultations with these practitioner-scholars ensured the coding, themes, and findings made sense. Finally, themes were reviewed with a higher education scholar and faculty member. This review brought the total cyclical process to a count of five. These themes were reviewed and reapplied to the data, creating the final findings. By creating a thorough and robust process, the analysis created a path for strong findings. Bloomberg (2023) also suggested qualitative research focuses on neutrality of the data rather than of the researcher, shifting a focus to data confirmability. Thus, my own assumptions and bias were not inhibiting factors to neutrality.

Finally, by outlining processes described in previous sections on the methods, bias and data saturation, and interrater reliability, I hoped to affirm the transferability of this study. As Bloomberg (2023) explained, researchers cannot confirm their own transferability or the ability for the study to be applied to other settings, but, rather, they can demonstrate through the steps that I outlined in these sections for further application.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research, like all research, had limitations and delimitations. Though Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated qualitative research is valid even with a small sample size of participants, the small size of the study should be noted. The small size could have contributed to limited understanding of the interplay and the effect on the roles of WOC.

Additionally, conducting a descriptive qualitative study rather than a more specific type was limiting. Hall and Liebenberg (2024) stated a preconceived notion exists that descriptive

research lacks academic rigor and quality. Sandelowski (2000) also stated descriptive research is less likely to contribute to scholarship or creation of new theories or conceptual frameworks. Finally, Braun and Clarke (2013) stated a limitation exists in the reliance of a researcher to simply interpret the findings, in this type of design. Despite these limitations for the method, I believe this design best fit the goals of the research that allowed for simple and focused data collection, centering the stories of WOC.

Although some limited representation of institution type existed, further breakdown was not shared to protect anonymity. Regarding representation for minority-serving institutions, historically Black colleges and universities were not represented. Including one could have shown how campus climate at a historically Black college and university affected the interplay in a different way than the minority-serving institutions and historically white institutions in this study. Though this study was open to participants across the country, representation was heavy from the Pacific region. No participants came from the Plains, and only one representative came from the Southeast.

With WOC representation, representational diversity existed across racial and ethnic categories of AAPI; Black/African/African American; Latina/Hispanic; Native American, Alaskan Native, and/or Indigenous; and SSWANA; however, within those categories, there was not as much representation of individual ethnicities. For SSWANA women, all identified as South Asian. Within the AAPI category, no Pacific Islanders participated, and both Latinas identified as Mexican or Mexican American. No one identified as bi- or multi-racial. Additionally, because of the small sample size, many of the racial categories only had one or two participants. When considering the cross-section of ethnicity or race and geography, a gap was the lack of representation of Black/African/African American women from the southern states, given its historical significance in this country and that community. Additionally, both Latina women were from the Pacific region as were both AAPI women. These contexts were important to consider in the findings. Across administrative roles and representation, there was representational diversity; however, seven participants had more than 20 years of experience, with an eighth participant having just under 20 years. Only two of the participants had 10 years of experience; thus, these data skewed to those with more experience.

The study was further limited in that only one 60-minute interview was conducted to collect data, providing a short amount of time to glean data from the participants. Additionally, the interview was conducted over a video platform, which could have limited a more personal connection. Finally, the institutional review board approval required video function to be turned off, which allowed for data to purely focus on content, but minimized the context of gestures, body language, and facial expressions. Researcher positionality, bias, and interpretation also could have been a limitation, as I identified with many of the markers of the participants as a woman of color, student affairs professional with over 20 years of experience in the field, whose functional area included response to campus activism and interpretation of free speech policies.

I specifically did not consider the experiences of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) to allow for examination of those roles who did not have the positionality as the highest decision-maker in the division or unit. Additionally, through searching research databases, it was evident a significant amount of research on student affairs staff focused on SSAOs. I also chose not to include early career staff because some research on that group and free speech

already existed (e.g., Duran-Leftin & Duran, 2021) and I thought their decision-making process would be different as they learn and develop their approach. I purposefully wanted to interview women who had a grounding and experience in this work. Finally, drawing from my epistemology, I did not include white women or men of color as part of the womanist commitment and framing to create research centered on WOC. These criteria helped manage scope and allowed for clearer analysis.

Conclusion

Overall, it was important to embed the theoretical underpinnings of constructionism and tranformativism, alongside a recognition of power structures informed by intersectionality into the methodology. This descriptive qualitative research allowed for a data collection approach that uplifted the voices of marginalized identities and provided a robust and authentic process. The deliberate methods, data collection, trustworthiness, and limitations were all backed by the ontological and epistemological foundations. When data are aligned with researcher philosophies, they can strengthen the findings. The next chapter includes data on WOC, followed by findings in subsequent chapter.

Chapter 4: Data on Women of Color

This section is organized into descriptions about each participant and each institution, followed by important contextual information for the study, and findings about the meaning of being a woman of color (WOC). Though not a case study research, I was inspired by that design method. Mills and Gay (2019) stated case study research draws on similar themes like critical sensemaking to ask how and why something happened in a particular site. Thus, I was able to integrate an aspect of critical sensemaking into these participant and site descriptions. Additionally, I wanted to be able to provide summative histories of each participant to acknowledge their individual background and identities. Similarly, for the institutions, I wanted to share accurate components of campus climate, including historical, structural, psychological, and behavioral dimensions (Hurtado, 1992); not to mention the external influencers, like politics and region (Hurtado et al., 2008). I hoped to paint a picture of how identity and campus climates can add substance to the themes and provide a foundation to compare sites and participants (Mills & Gay, 2019).

Information for each participant was drawn from the demographic forms, interviews, and a cursory review of biographies on institutional websites and LinkedIn. Information about institutions was pulled from the interviews and institution websites. All data were current at the time of the interview. Specific definitions for staffing structures can be found in the Key Terminology section of Chapter 1. All participant and institution names are pseudonyms.

Participant and Site Description 1: Claudia and Little Burd State University

Claudia identified as a Mexican and an immigrant. She was the daughter of farm workers, an English language learner, and a first-generation college student. She identified as a WOC because she felt like it allowed her to navigate social constructs in this country. Claudia used she/her pronouns and identified as a cisgender woman. She had 20–25 years working in the field of student affairs and worked at her institution for over 10 years, where she currently served in a senior-level role. Claudia's current experience of the interplay included direct response to campus activism and protest, though she was not the lead. She also experienced the interplay through support of individual students. She held both a master's degree and a doctorate in education.

Little Burd State University (LBSU) was a public university in the Pacific region. It was large, with 20,000–40,000 students, and located in a suburban area. At LBSU, most students were in-state students and over half were women. LBSU offered over 100 academic majors and over 100 graduate degrees. LBSU had around 20 varsity athletic teams. LBSU had more than 800 student organizations, including Greek Life. The university had several identity centers that contributed to student life and a robust student government. To support staff, LBSU had multiple staff affinity groups and a staff assembly.

Participant and Site Description 2: Danielle and Juniper University

Danielle identified as a Black woman and pansexual. She used she/her pronouns. Danielle was a first-generation college student. She identified as able-bodied and fat, U.S.-born, and an English speaker. She identified with the phrase WOC and considered the common but varying experience that Black and Brown women share as one of the core connections to that phrase. She had 20–25 years working in the field of student affairs and had worked at her institution for less than 5 years, where she currently served in a senior-level role. Danielle's current experience with the interplay included direct response to campus activism and protest,

though she was not the lead. She also experienced the interplay through support of individual students. She held both a master's degree and a doctorate in education.

Juniper University (JU) was a private university in the Southwest region. It was a midsized institution, with less than 20,000 students, and located in an urban area. It had 11 academic units, with over 100 undergraduate majors. Less than half the students lived on campus. JU had approximately 20 varsity athletics teams. Over half the students were women, and a large majority of students were from out of state. There were over 150 clubs and organizations, including Greek Life. There was a unit that supported inclusive education for students. Staff at JU had a staff assembly and an association to support staff of color.

Participant and Site Description 3: Neelima and The Paddy State University

Neelima identified as a South Asian woman and the child of immigrants. She also identified as Hindu. Neelima used she/her pronouns, was heterosexual, and identified as a woman of color. She noted identifying as a WOC came from the "resilience and perseverance [needed] because of the adversity" that WOC face. She had 20–25 years of experience in student affairs and had worked at her institution for less than 5 years where she served in an assistant/associate vice provost (AVP) or assistant/associate vice chancellor (AVC) role. Neelima's current experience with the interplay included her direct responsibilities for support of campus activism and protest response, along with support of students directly affected by free speech policies. She held both a master's degree and a doctorate in education.

The Paddy State University (PSU) was a public university located in the Pacific region. It was a very large institution, with over 40,000 students, and was located in a suburban area. PSU offered over 100 majors and over 100 graduate programs. A significant majority of students were from in-state and slightly more than half were women. At PSU, there were around 20 varsity athletic teams. It had more than 750 student organizations and Greek Life opportunities. The student government played a formative role. The university had several identity based centers. PSU had a staff assembly and several staff affinity groups.

Participant and Site Description 4: Cassandra and Eucalyptus University

Cassandra identified as a Mexican American, middle-aged, working mother. She used she/her pronouns, and identified as cisgender, heterosexual, and as woman of color. She identified as a WOC because of her experiences of colorism and being systemically treated differently coming from a marginalized community. Cassandra was upper-middle class. She had 20–25 years working in the field of student affairs and had worked at her current institution for over 10 years. Her most current role was as a senior-level staff member. Cassandra's current experience with the interplay came from her role as a thought partner in activism and protest response and from direct work with students affected by free speech policies. Cassandra held a master's degree in education.

Eucalyptus University (EU) was a private university in the Pacific region. It was a midsize university, with less than 20,000 students. Eucalyptus was located in a suburban area and was a residential campus. A majority of students were from out of state and there was a relative balance of women and men students enrolled. EU offered over 50 majors and over 100 graduate programs. There were over 25 varsity athletic teams. There were over 700 student organizations, including Greek Life groups. The university hosted several identity-based centers. The university had several affinity groups for staff.

Participant and Site Description 5: Savita and Magnolia University

Savita identified as queer and South Asian. She identified as a woman of color because she had to fight systems of inequality and injustice, especially as compared to men. She used she/her pronouns and was a cisgender and middle aged. Savita also identified as middle-class and Hindu. She had been working in the field of student affairs for 20–25 years and had been at her current institution for less than 5 years. She served in an AVP or AVC role. Savita's current experience with the interplay included her functional area of response to campus activism and protest, along with support of students directly affected by free speech policies. Savita held a master's degree and doctorate degree in education.

Magnolia University (MU) was a private university in the Southeastern region. It was a midsize university, with less than 20,000 students. Magnolia was located in an urban area and was a residential campus. A majority of students were from out of state and there were slightly more women than men enrolled. MU offered over 50 majors and more than 80 graduate programs. MU had over 25 varsity athletic teams and over 600 student organizations. Greek Life played a role in campus life. The university had many identity-based centers on campus. For staff, Magnolia University had several staff affinity groups.

Participant and Site Description 6: Sarena and State University of the True American

Sarena identified as an Asian American immigrant. She used she/her pronouns and was cisgender and heterosexual, and identified as a WOC, which she believed was a sociopolitical construct that needed to exist because of white supremacy. Sarena also identified as middle-upper class, middle-age, and a parent, and was able-bodied. She had over 25 years of experience in student affairs and had worked at her institution for more than 10 years. The most current role she held was as an AVP or AVC role. Sarena's current experience with the interplay included her direct responsibilities for support of campus activism and protest response, along with support of students directly affected by free speech policies. She held both a master's degree and doctorate in education.

State University of the True American (SUTA) was a public university in the Pacific region. It was a very large institution with more than 40,000 students. It was located in an urban area. The majority of students were from in-state. SUTA offered over 100 degree programs for both graduate and undergraduate students. SUTA had over 25 varsity athletic teams. There were over 1,000 student organizations, including Greek Life organizations. The institution included several identity-based centers. To support staff, SUTA had both a staff assembly and multiple staff affinity groups.

Participant and Site Description 7: Malini and Oak Tree University

Malini identified as a South Asian immigrant. She used she/her pronouns and identified as a woman of color as a form of solidarity and community with others who have had similar experiences. She was a first-generation college student. Malini was also middle-class and was raised Catholic. Malini had 10 years of experience working in the field of student affairs. She had worked at her current institution for less than a year and held a director-manager role. Malini's current experience with the interplay included managing campus conversations around dialogue. Campus activism and oversight did not fall in her functional area. Malini held both a master's degree and a doctoral degree in education.

Oak Tree University (OTU) was a private university in the Northeast. It was a large university, with 20,000–40,000 students. OTU was located in an urban area and was a

residential campus. A majority of students were from out of state, with more women than men enrolled. OTU offered over 50 majors. OTU had over 25 varsity athletics teams. Student life included over 800 student organizations, including Greek Life organizations. The institution had many identity-based centers. There was a staff assembly to support staff.

Participant and Site Description 8: Keisha and State University of Monajjar

Keisha identified as an Indigenous mom–scholar. She was a first-generation college student, used she/her pronouns, and identified as a WOC, which was informed by her understanding of ancestors’ labor to forge the paths that she had access to today. Keisha also identified as heterosexual. Keisha had worked in the fields of student affairs or education for 10 years. She had worked at her institution for more than 5 years. Keisha’s current role was as an interim director-manager, and her experience with the interplay included oversight for an identity center and any support for students trying to understand free speech policies. Keisha dedicated her entire professional career to State University of Monajjar. Keisha held a master’s degree in education and was currently a doctoral student in education.

State University of Monajjar (SUM) was a public university in the Southwest. It was a large institution, with 20,000–40,000 students and located in a suburban area. A large majority of students were from within the state and more than half are women. SUM offered over 160 undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degree programs. SUM had about 20 varsity athletic teams. There were more than 250 student organizations, including Greek Life. The university had several identity centers that contributed to student life. SUM had many staff affinity groups.

Participant and Site Description 9: Nia and Whitlock State University

Nia identified as a Black, cisgender woman. She used she/her pronouns and identified as a woman of color due to her family background and history with race, multiculturalism, and traumas endured in her family history. Nia also identified as heterosexual, Christian, and a mother. She was able-bodied. Nia had about 20 years working in the field of student affairs and had been at her current institution for less than 5 years. She served in an AVP or AVC role. Nia’s current experience with the interplay included her oversight of multiple areas including diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice initiatives and student wellness. Nia held a master’s degree and a doctoral degree in education.

Whitlock State University (WSU) was a public university in the Northeast. It was a very large institution with more than 40,000 students. It was located in a rural area. The majority of students were from in-state. WSU offered over 200 undergraduate majors and over 150 graduate programs. WSU had over 25 varsity athletic teams. WSU had over 1,000 student organizations, including Greek Life. The institution had some identity-based centers to support students. To support staff, WSU had affinity groups, though none for staff of color, and a staff assembly.

Participant and Site Description 10: Avery and Gofish State University

Avery identified as an Asian American and a woman of color. Her “critical awareness” of how both her race and gender and being raced and gendered systematically influenced her understanding of being a WOC. She was a first-generation college student. Avery used she/they pronouns, was queer/bisexual, was a mother, and identified as agnostic. Avery had over 25 years of experience in student affairs and worked at her current institution for over 5 years. She served in an interim AVP or AVC role; however, she left the position right before this interview.

In that role, her experience with the interplay included direct responsibilities for support of campus activism and protest response, along with support of students directly affected by free speech policies. Avery held a master's degree and a doctorate degree.

Gofish State University (GSU) was a public university in the Pacific region. With 20,000–40,000 students, it was a large university, located in an urban area. Most students were from within state and about half the students were women and half were men. GSU offered over 100 academic majors and over 100 graduate programs. GSU had about 20 varsity athletic teams. There were over 350 student organizations, including Greek Life. The university had several identity centers that supported student life. To support the staff at GSU, there was a staff assembly and several affinity groups.

Context Setting

It is important to consider additional context setting before delving into more details about the findings. When the interviews took place in the summer of 2025, all participants said their answers would have been different 2 years prior, alluding to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict elevated in October 2023 and the second presidency of Trump, which included an attack on higher education (Weingarten, 2025). Thus, the context was inherently different given these campus climate changes. Yet, given this targeting of higher education, none of the participants stated they were fearful to share opinions or ideas about their commitments to equity and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Additionally, although this research was presented to include all forms of the interplay by providing participants with examples in the interview (see Appendix D), many of the responses tended to focus on campus protests and encampments on college campuses, especially those coming because of October 7th, during the 2023–2024 academic year. All the SSWANA women specifically identified as South Asian. Thus, there were no Southwest Asian or North African women in my study. This was particularly important as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was such a central influence.

Four of the 10 women worked at private universities where First Amendment protections are not guaranteed in the same way as public universities in most states (Palfrey, 2017). However, there did not seem to be major empirical differences in the findings from private to public universities in how WOC managed the interplay, including student protests. This result could be due to many private universities still upholding state and federal first amendment rights. Finally, though participant and site descriptions were created for the participant's current institution and context, many of them spoke to the contexts of all the campuses where they had worked, not just their current institution.

The Meaning of WOC

Before I delve into the findings, I also want to elevate the participants as WOC, specifically sharing their thoughts on being WOC. I share this to showcase the nuance and complexity from the research, which mirrors research in the literature review. All of the participants stated their own ethnic identity influenced them to consider being a woman of color. Additionally, more than half of the participants spoke of deep connections to family members who influenced their identity, approach, and navigation of the world. They spoke about ancestry, migration and family histories, and how they personally identify ethnically. A large majority (8 of the 10 participants) referenced solidarity and camaraderie with other WOC as a factor in their identification with the term. Those participants spoke about camaraderie allowing for them to feel more representation and connection. Finally, many of the participants

(8 out of 10) attributed systemic racism or whiteness to their understanding and identification with the term. Those participants spoke about inequities in the world that make being a woman of color more difficult. Some examples have been included in Table 3.

Table 3

What It Means to Be a Woman of Color

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Own Identity and Ancestry	Claudia	I think being a woman of color is kind of it's an identity that I've started to embrace, most recently, because I feel very connected to my identity of being Mexican.
	Nia	When I say a woman of color is very different from a lot of what some of my colleagues may say, because I see the intersections of my great grandmothers in that, but I do primarily identify as a Black woman.
	Keisha	I know, as a Native and Indigenous woman, [I] am some of the first to come into these spaces, and also I grew up watching the elders do this work in our community . . . and so those women were my mentors.
Solidarity and Camaraderie	Danielle	Identifying as a Black woman in particular, and identifying as a woman of color, for me means that, well, I think about my sisters, my Brown sisters . . . we've got some level of common experience. It's not equal. It's not the same. But there are some things that we all as WOC experience.
	Malini	And then, especially as I got into Student Affairs, it became a real solidarity and community term, because often . . . there weren't a lot of a lot of other South Asian women on my specific campus, but there were other WOC who had shared experiences, shared struggles, and there was always a really strong sense of community and support.
	Cassandra	Identifying as a woman of color is interesting . . . because it feels more connected to other women who are marginalized, not just other Latinx women or women who identify as Latina, it's more all-encompassing as well, which there's some solidarity in that, particularly if you are . . . the only person of a certain unrepresented or marginalized community in a room.
Facing Systemic Racism	Savita	I am still fighting systems of inequity around men, equal pay . . . fair rights, parental leave. It also means that as a person of color, I'm navigating predominantly white systems, and none of those systems are made for me.
	Sarena	It's a sociopolitical construct, which means that I think physically, biologically really means nothing . . .

Theme	Participant	Quotation
		however, except in the context that we live in a racist America and we live in a global context where white supremacy reigns all over the world.

It should be noted Sarena shared a powerful reminder that not all WOC serve as allies for equity work, further making the idea of WOC more complicated. The next chapter provides an in-depth understanding of the findings.

Chapter 5: Findings

From my qualitative methodology, including inductive coding, thematic analysis, and validation and reliability testing, I was able to gather comprehensive findings. The body of this section includes these major findings, alongside quotations that enhance and provide nuance. Additionally, I included a finding that emerged outside the research questions. The chapter also ends with a conclusion.

This descriptive qualitative study examined how women of color (WOC) leaders in student affairs, who managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. The interplay, or interplay of free speech and inclusion, was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities.

Analysis of data led to four major findings. To cohesively describe my findings, I chose to use an analogy to thematically convey a story. This intertwining and building on each other is what Bloomberg (2023) called "layering and interconnecting" (p. 372). The four findings are also summarized in Table 4.

1. In the Groundwater: Whiteness is embedded into campus climate affecting the roles of WOC and causing them to make dynamic shifts in those roles to adjust for the inequities in institutions. Influenced by the prolific work of Hayes-Green and Love (2018) to describe structural racism's inequities as groundwater, this finding emphasized that factors such as outside influencers, laws and policies, and psychological stressors across institutions form a foundation of whiteness. Whiteness is a discourse, systemic structure, and combination of habits and behaviors that center on the failure to recognize racial inequity ingrained both historically and contemporarily (E. A. Collins et al., 2020). This whiteness then causes WOC to shift their roles to counterbalance those factors.
2. Sourcing the Tools: Three precursors, understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves are required to prepare WOC for managing the interplay. This second finding revealed the importance of interweaving knowledge, skills, and support to help balance impartial policies with equity.
3. Buried Seeds: Though WOC leaders in student affairs are systemically undervalued and feel an internal conflict with the interplay, they, like buried seeds, develop resilience to push through barriers to navigate the interplay. The Zapatista (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018) adage, "*Quisieron enterrarnos, pero se les olvido que somos semillas*" translates to "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds," inspired this finding and is based on the Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos's words. This finding shows WOC manage the interplay through learning, understanding, and then incorporating it into their work.
4. Tilling the Soil: Institutional commitments that center equity, inclusion, and WOC voices enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay. This final finding showed, for institutions to ensure equity, they had to systemically commit to supporting WOC's leadership alongside the development of students.

Table 4
Summary of Four Major Findings

Research questions	Findings	Subfinding
R1: How does the campus climate of their institution in regard to the interplay affect their role?	F1: In the Groundwater: whiteness is embedded into campus climate causing WOC to make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequalities	1.1. Factors Affecting the Interplay 1.2. Experiencing Challenging Environments 1.3. Responding to Conditions
R2: What precursors assist women leaders of color in student affairs in understanding and approaching the interplay?	F2: Sourcing the Tools: Three tools, understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves are required to prepare WOC for managing the interplay	2.1 Institutional Nuances of Free Speech 2.2 Approaches to Support Students 2.3 Robust Community of Support
R3: How do women leaders of color in student affairs navigate the interplay?	F3: Buried Seeds: Though WOC leaders in student affairs are systemically undervalued and feel an internal conflict with the interplay, they push through barriers to embody the interplay	3.1 Learning the How-To 3.2 Reconciling Roles and Identities 3.3 Embodiment of the Interplay
R4: What institutional commitments enhance their management of the interplay?	F4: Tilling the Soil: Institutions need to make commitments that center equity, inclusion and WOC voices to enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay	4.1 Enactment of Inequitable Interplay 4.2 Commitment to Student Outcomes

Major Finding 1: In the Groundwater

The first major finding, In the Groundwater, showed whiteness is embedded into campus climate, causing WOC to make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequalities in institutions. Whiteness has been the center of scholarly discourse for decades yet does not have a concrete definition (Cabrera et al., 2017). One way to consider whiteness is as an enabler (Cabrera, 2019). It facilitates racist interaction and reactions on campus because whiteness is steeped into the institution's way of being, permeating policies, infrastructure, and support systems, harming communities of color without overtly or directly targeting them. This

shapes what institutions do and how practices are embedded (E. A. Collins et al., 2020). In consideration of the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE), this could create a racially hostile campus environment, as purported by Harper and Hurtado (2007). Another description of whiteness is it is reified by institutions whenever it is criticized (Cabrera et al., 2017). This double downing rather than examination seems to validate its place. Finally, a third lens to consider whiteness is, though the “racial composition of higher education may be changing . . . the institution’s racial culture, climate, or ecology [is not]” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 52), indicating a stagnation to protect whiteness.

Specifically, this finding emphasized these structural and institutional misalignments as they relate to the roles of WOC leaders. The WOC in my study were able to recognize its positioning, but, due to its engrainedness, it was hard to rupture. This was not a new experience but seemed to be emphasized in particular due to their roles managing the interplay. This finding showed a cause and effect pattern that repeated itself, whereby institutional whiteness coupled with interpersonal whiteness caused the WOC to adjust their roles to subvert it. These ideas are crafted into three subfindings, detailed as follows. See Table F1 in Appendix F for details regarding Research Question 3, its findings, and subfindings.

Subfinding 1.1 Factors Affecting the Interplay

The first subfinding was factors affecting the interplay. Factors affecting the interplay were defined as the campus climate factors that most influenced how the interplay was approached, potentially limiting the management of the interplay. Examples of these limitations included racist federal actions, laws, and policies that harm marginalized groups, or university histories that do not include the voices of all student communities. When considering the first subfinding, many ideas the participants shared overlapped with factors from the MMDLE model (Hurtado et al., 2012), such as institutional type, laws and policies, and internal values like institutional neutrality.

Many participants referenced how the history of the institution, the structure, and the region made a difference in how they could manage the interplay. Some spoke about how external factors can impact the work, extolling how all these factors may not make an impact individually but, together, create a foundation where decisions are impacted by these factors. Sarena shared:

But when the rubber hits the road, we (the institution) become less inclusive. There’s a lot less tolerance. And that line is very subjective, depending on our campus culture. Who’s in charge, who the donors are, what state that you live in, what influence your stakeholders have? Are you public? Are you private? Are you prone to being in the media?

These ideas reiterated how values alignment in the climate was difficult once all the factors started to intertwine. Additionally, this finding explained the complexities of institutions due to size, structure, and nature and how commitments to free speech and inclusion, with Cassandra expanding some of Sarena’s earlier shared thoughts. Cassandra said:

It’s impossible to be nearly values aligned. . . . And I also think that we’re not all implementing everything in the same way; that would be just so impossible with the amount of staff we have, with the amount of people we have to care for . . . it’s just inevitably if we don’t interrogate every single system using the same framework. I think I’m still optimistic, cautiously optimistic, that I don’t think the institution I work for

intentionally tries to counter its own inclusion efforts. But I think, like most large institutions, it inevitably does.

Cassandra's thought exemplified what many participants shared about the complications that arose in doing equity work and holding free speech synonymously. Additionally, speaking to the history of institutions, this finding emphasized how there were "drastic differences," as Nia stated, following by saying, "My former institution was very free speech forward and didn't hide from that. I think there were historical components of the institution's history that allowed us to empower our students in a very different way." This emphasized how institutional type can affect the interplay.

Other participants described how campus climate at other institutions affected theirs and vice versa, driving home the idea that institutions do not exist in a vacuum. Savita stated: We're in the (Southwest) . . . and there's a special spotlight on our school that is not on other schools . . . things would be happening down the street at another institution, and that was portrayed differently in the media, that was portrayed differently by legislators. . . .It's not just our campus climate when you have this proximity to other institutions. It's campus climate at the other institutions that impact it.

Neelima stated, "The environment around campus has been challenging, depending where one sits in identities and politics. And I actually feel like I observed this nationally, not just on campus." Her reference to the political effects on that positionality and the campus affirmed the multidirectional influence, in addition to her acknowledgement that her campus's experience was not unique. Similarly, Malini referenced region and state politics specifically as factors that counter work done internally. She said, "State governors, state board of trustees, and especially in red states . . . countering to what we were trying to do, or what a free speech policy was." This showcased that internal control was limited.

Federal policies and updates were also an important part of understanding the impact of campus climate, as Danielle reported, "[A staff member] says 'it's the slow erasure of DEI in the communities that we support.' . . . I don't know that there is anything that we could do that would change the way that they interpret and manage the freedom of expression policy." This referred to the Trump administrations limiting DEI efforts. It is important to note this comment came from a participant in a blue state, cementing the pervasiveness of federal updates. Overall, this subfinding emphasized the many infrastructural and climate contributors to the interplay.

Subfinding 1.2 Experiencing Challenging Environments

The next subfinding that arose was the lived experiences that arose from challenging environments that made it difficult for WOC to address the interplay. Unlike the campus climate factors subfinding, these experiences were not directly related to campus climate, but rather elements that influenced working environments. They tended to be the nonexistence of supportive measures in a university, such as a lack of trust and agency, limited affinity spaces, and stressors like gendered racial battle fatigue. In this section, I purposely quoted from all 10 participants to paint a picture of the challenges they faced.

Many of the women in my study spoke about the harm of psychological stressors, such as emotional labor, gendered racial battle fatigue, and burnout, along with lack of trust and agency that formed tough and corrosive working environments and limited their ability to manage the interplay. In consideration of the MMDLE, this section seemed to fall in line with

the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the framework. Nia explained, “I am exhausted from feeling like a threat because of the power I bring into a particular space. I’ve actually been told that by colleagues at my institution, with them trying to compliment me.” Similar to her feedback, Sarena shared, “I can very easily be labeled as difficult for saying the same things in the same way that my white male colleagues do.” Both of these women gave examples about how their unfair and unequal treatment as individuals, particularly as both people of color and woman, left them targeted. Savita relayed, “I think when you’re functioning from burnout and to add one more thing; it impacts our ability to think beyond the policy binary, right?” This quote clarified how these stressors impacted her ability to approach work managing the interplay, which is, in itself, tough. Cassandra shared, “I think what’s hard is continuing self-care for all the things I feel personally.” Finally, Avery shared, “There are certain things about how I’m both perceived and then how I show up that are contradictory. . . . As an Asian American . . . I have been treated as automatically assuming that I’m inexperienced . . . I can’t handle leadership roles.” This statement directly connected her ethnic identity to negative treatment by other colleagues and constituents at her institution. In the next section, I share how this experience affected her role.

Another area several participants revealed that impacted their abilities to work centered on the concept that staff did not hold academic freedom and it limited how they personally and professionally related to and could impact this work. This experience was juxtaposed with how faculty, and students to a point, may be able to access academic freedom. For example, Neelima stated, “Tenured faculty have academic freedom and free speech in their professional roles, where staff don’t. And I think that that’s really hard, too. I think it’s really hard maintaining neutrality all the time.” Her idea emphasized, without academic freedom, staff must remain neutral, not being able to share how they interrupt or understand systems of harm, inequity, or oppression. Nia shared this sentiment with an analogy speaking to how she approaches faculty. She said, “‘I’m positioned very differently than you, because you are faculty and I am not.’ . . . And I said, so ‘I’m Martin, you’re Malcolm. Go for it.’” Her request to faculty was also a strategy and a nod to collaboration, both of which were themes in subsequent findings, enhancing the interplay through strategy. I share a final example to emphasize the pervasiveness of the lack of academic freedom on WOC in student affairs and, in particular, its impact on their work, particularly managing the interplay, causing strife. Malini suggested:

I would separate us from the faculty in that aspect because I think faculty, specifically tenure track faculty, have those protections, but us as administrators, sometimes are in between that line of, how can we practice free speech? How are we allowed to do this? How are we allowed to engage in things inside and outside of the institution that do and don’t align with our practices, especially if we are practitioners that focus on inclusive practices.

Similar to the lack of academic freedom, a part of what made experiences in challenging environment was a lack of trust. Keisha recalled in a conversation about protest response when she said, “I remember the VP [vice president] bringing it up to the senior leadership. She was like ‘This is all of our job. This isn’t just student affairs job. You guys need to respect them more than that.’” The meaning of this quotation resonated with many of the participants who also shared examples about feeling a need to prove themselves, not being allowed to make decisions, and feeling like their roles were dismissed. Similarly, when speaking about campus

leadership, Claudia stated, “They also have to trust that . . . I have observed and supported many of these events, and I can understand the dynamic that we can make it worse by creating a very restrictive conduct system versus an educational system,” clarifying she felt like she was not entrusted to make decisions nor would the decisions be grounded in her marginalized experiences that paralleled many of the student experiences.

This subfinding, along with the first subfinding, showed evidence of the lived experiences created for the women that affected the interplay. The next subfinding delves into how that and the first subfinding directly affect their role.

Subfinding 1.3 Responding to Conditions

Finally, a subfinding called responding to the conditions emerged. Whereas the first two subfindings described the campus climate and experience of environmental factors, the third subfinding focused on the WOC’s roles. The final subfinding for this finding was about the ways WOC responded to the conditions they experience. These could look like drawing from their own identities, freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2003), masquerading, anxiety, or caution. The list encompassed a spectrum of responses, indicating the conditions could cause both positive and negative associations. Additionally, in this subfinding, I found the most variance in how each individual woman described their response.

One way the women in my study responded to these conditions was to draw from their own identities. Claudia stated, “My own personal experiences and my own lived experiences also provide me context and how to address the situation.” This statement exemplified her belief in the viability of those experiences, using them as a source of empowerment. Malini also shared, “So I think I’m in this place of responding because of my identities and my background and knowledge of ‘What does it mean to operate as a person of color and a woman of color on these campuses and also advocating for these students in the same way?’” Her reflection affirmed that her response was rooted in those identities and they could not be disentangled from it.

Danielle provided an example of freedom dreaming. Coined by Kelley (2003), freedom dreaming is a tool with history in the Black community to use hope as a form of resilience to poor conditions. Danielle said, “I’m trying to reconcile the institution that I work at versus the one that I’m dreaming of,” painting a picture of her desire for change.

Keisha explained that her response, regardless of the type of condition, was to be passionate and advocate for herself and her community. Her description accounted for feeling the heaviness of policies, combined with her own identity, almost justifying passion as the only sensible response. Keisha explained:

I think everyone thinks we’re always just dramatic or . . . but when you combine all of those issues, the way the policy is . . . the way we are, I think it’s a lot and so it’s hard. I think, for senior leadership, to understand how much community we bring with us into these spaces and why that passion sometimes could come off as like a broken record.

Although I already shared Avery’s experience as an Asian-American woman, I share her response to those overtly racist and underlyingly gendered conditions of dismissal in this section. She said, “Because I have to perform a certain level of authority. So that when I enter into a room, when I show up into a space, I’m immediately legible as an administrator.” Avery discussed needing to assume an authoritative role to be more legitimized and accepted as a leader. Specifically, in this example, she explained dressing a certain way to exude this role.

Both Cassandra and Neelima expressed fear or anxiety-based responses. Cassandra considered a response of WOC holding back because “someone doesn’t want to put themselves in a position to not be liked, or someone doesn’t want to be on the news, or someone doesn’t want to be in the press,” reiterating the conditions sometimes caused WOC to disengage. Neelima shared her response of fear of backlash in her role as a public and prominent leader in her institution. Neelima shared:

I really don’t want to be doxed for so many reasons. I don’t think anybody wishes that in any means. But it’s just, it’s not something I want to deal with for now or for my future I have, I have future ambitions.

Finally, Nia gave two examples, showing the variety of responses, even for the same person. She first described how her institution tried not to agitate or disrupt norms. Because this varied from previous roles, institutions, and conditions, she had to adapt her response by being more cautious in her role. Nia stated:

And that has what I call given us the “ostrich head in the sand syndrome,” where we want to pretend we’re not seen, we want to lay low, we don’t want to ruffle any feathers. . . . So . . . I’ve actually had to take a step back and observe a little bit more, because I have such a, you know, forward facing.

Yet, she also explained how the conditions empowered her and her response. Nia explained:

In my current role, I’m the only person of color at the senior leadership table. And I know that that has a big burden on my back, as well as a target that follows behind it, and I am unapologetically me, and therefore hoping to make some shifts and changes to the minds that might have been closed off prior to my arrival.

In this subfinding, I described how WOC shared how the conditions at their institutions affected their roles, with a spectrum of responses engaged. It clarified no de facto response existed but rather a variety of ways showing nuance, context, and lived experiences mattered.

Factors related to Major Finding 1 and its corresponding three subfindings stemmed from whiteness, where racism is systemically ingrained to the extent that the institution perpetuates injustice (Cabrera et al., 2017). The finding emphasized the invisible structures that disenfranchise WOC at an institution and cause them to make shifts to their roles. In a nod to that invisibility, this finding references those invisible infrastructures that are slowly in the groundwater.

Major Finding 2: Sourcing the Tools

The second major finding, Sourcing the Tools, discussed tools, or precursors, that the WOC garnered to prepare them to manage the interplay. Typically, these tools were sought out with the acknowledgement that WOC could not engage evasively with the interplay; they needed to be prepared. These precursors ranged with some being institutional, some being individualized, and some falling in between. For example, many of the women reported grappling with neutrality, carving out pathways of self-sustenance, and prioritizing a role in teaching students. Interestingly, the women were not directly asked what they needed to feel prepared, but all the participants agreed it was important. Not all the women shared the same tools; however, they seemed to thematically align into three types, broadly addressed as interweaving knowledge, skills, and support to help balance impartial policies with equity.

Additionally, these typologies seemed to loosely fit into systems-based tools, relational-based tools, and individual tools, mimicking systems thinking whereby approaches are needed

at every level. There also seemed to be inherent ideas of tools that would help manage this interplay, as opposed to tools that would hinder their preparation. For example, they all understood the type of relationship they needed to engage with protesting students, which may be different from other relationships focused on mentoring. Specifically, the tools or precursors were understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves. This second finding revealed the importance of being primed to do the work. The specific subfindings are titled institutional nuances of free speech, approaches to support students, and a robust community of support, which are detailed next. See Table F2 in Appendix F for details regarding Research Question 2, its findings, and subfindings.

Subfinding 2.1 Institutional Nuances of Free Speech Policies

Institutional nuances of free speech policies was defined as the hidden outcomes of free speech policies. Though they were invisibilized, the impact on campus was profound not only for constituents but also for systems and had unseen impacts on campus life, including on staff, students, and the campus climate. These include ideas such as policies not being neutrally applied and a recognition of the existence of power dynamics and their targeting and harm of marginalized students. Additionally, staff on the ground, like the women in this study, were rarely consulted about the policies and their implementation.

Two participants, Avery and Sarena, shared overarching and strong critiques that spoke to this subfinding. Avery stated, “We see these policies have been viewed by many higher ed institutions as a way to control, manage, not only students, but protests and expressions of dissent on college campuses;” whereas Sarena said, “And I also know, as a longtime career college administrator, that policies are not always neutral.” Both of these statements showed how even though policies were supposed to help enact free speech on campus, they could also counteract it. Other participants shared less critical but just as impactful thoughts on this nuance, with Neelima stating, “Policies really support free speech and I think the impact of that is that people do not feel like the policies are inclusive . . . what one group sees as advocacy another group is perceiving as oppression.” Neelima’s viewpoint homed in on one of the conundrums of managing the interplay: how do WOC who uphold equity do so when whatever decision they make feel like they are inequitable to one group.

An additional idea that connected to this subfinding was consideration of power: who holds it, why, and how that affects campus. Both Nia and Sarena spoke about it, when discussing campus climate. Nia stated, “Yet, it’s like this fear of holding on to power as if it’s a zero sum game.” Sarena similarly expressed, “But it’s that same power dynamic, folks, and no one in power wants to give up power.” Both these ideas seemed to home in on the idea that those in power have more access to power and vice versa.

Another example that emerged was about neutrality. The idea also centered on inequitable access to power but deepened to specifically address free speech policies. Claudia posed:

But if it’s starting for me to feel that the viewpoint neutrality is being dismissed at times, particularly depending on who has the privilege to say that that viewpoint is on protected speech rather than unprotected speech. . . it’s who’s at the space, who has the privilege, who has the voice, who are the stronger voices to tell campus administration, this feels really, this viewpoint needs to be stopped . . . I think the most

marginalized voices continue to feel like not heard, no matter how many protests, how many rallies, how many campus violations they have.

The quotation from Claudia also referenced that people in power were culling how to execute free speech policies on campus, and not applying it equitably. Malini also discussed this when she said, “It feels like we’re picking and choosing what parts we enforce, or when we enforce, how we enforce,” with both referencing seemingly unfair practices toward students from marginalized communities.

Avery discussed how free speech policies on campus were tightened in recent years to ensure first amendment rights were protected to the highest standard and were not allowed to have nuanced, on the ground, control. Yet, no work was done to ensure they also considered and espoused equity. Avery discussed:

Now there’s a broader view of these policies that are about capital F, capital S, free speech, that happen on campus. And this shift has been really significant. I would say Black Lives Matter protests, and also, more recently, all of the protests that have occurred post October 7. . . . And for the most part, there really isn’t a critical lens in which people are also saying what are our equity and our inclusionary practices that shape these policies?

Finally, an important part of this subfinding was how participants described not being consulted about the content of the policies even though they were first responders managing the interplay. Keisha spoke about an incident regarding mixed messaging from cabinet level leadership of what staff needed to manage a protest. She said, “I didn’t know what we were doing, but it was nice to know that the rest of the divisions felt the same. And so, there was a lot of conversations and things that changed.” Her conclusion showed clarity was eventually achieved after numerous conversations, but the initial edict that came from leadership left staff feeling disengaged with decisions made top-down. In this case, the results were harmful to the student body, though the next time communication was improved. Danielle expressed a less positive result when she shared:

It goes to the freedom of expression committee . . . they are getting to decide whose voices get to be heard, and it’s mostly faculty . . . and the things they were saying that student affairs would have to do to manage these spaces, was like, “Have you ever been to a protest that’s full of students who are pissed?” because this document does not show that you have and so . . . we edited it, and said, “Here’s all the feedback!” And they didn’t take our feedback. And so, it’s becoming the permanent policy and our students, they don’t understand what we mean by freedom of expression.

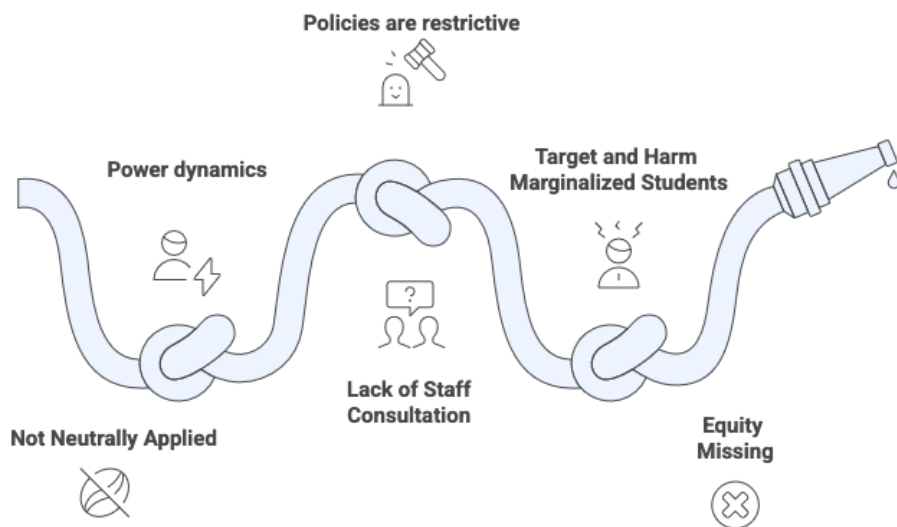
In Danielle’s analysis, she showed clear frustration in the lack of inclusive decision making, especially given her expertise. This quotation exemplified how many participants felt about the diminishing importance of their roles as advocates for students and the dismissive nature from faculty despite student affairs staff members’ expertise.

This subfinding is broken down into Figure 2. The figure, connecting to my horticulture theme, uses a garden hose with knots to symbolize the challenges with these institutional nuances that limit an institution’s ability to center equity. It specifically includes power dynamics, not neutrally applied, the lack of staff consultation, the targeting and harm of marginalized students, and that equity is missing. It emphasizes how this knowledge of this information serves as a tool for WOC to approach managing the interplay. Later in this chapter,

I present a subfinding suggesting how universities can make commitments to counter these narratives.

Figure 2

Institutional Nuances of Free Speech



Note. Figure created by author using Napkin AI.

Subfinding 2.2 Approaches to Support Students

Approaches to support students was defined as the multiple ways WOC supported students engaging in free speech to ensure students had the resources they needed. This subfinding established the need of WOC to ensure students had the right education and resources to be successful as part of the WOC preparation to manage the interplay.

Eight of the participants spoke to the development and educational components of the interplay, in particular when speaking about protest. For example, Claudia stated, “I also understand that it’s developmentally appropriate for students to have student activism activities on their campus, because that’s what feels safe for them. . . . This is their educational environment.” In this idea, she affirmed protest should be encouraged, as opposed to providing policies and practices that deter it. Avery expanded that idea to state:

At the end of the day, we need to support students in everything they do in developmental ways. . . . And I remind officials that students should be doing these things. They should be protesting. They should be messing up. They should be making bad decisions. Because not only is it age appropriate, it’s developmentally appropriate.

In her analysis, Avery provided more context for how various constituents approach protest and student activism, encouraging the idea that policies should allow for that. This statement also validated the finding that WOC need to support this inherent student right in their management of the interplay. Cassandra took this concept in a slightly different direction, explaining why those policies may be restrictive; administrators do not understand out of classroom education and do not like to be questioned, and those experiences take away from student opportunities. Cassandra posed:

But there's a lot of people that I don't think actually like working with students . . . I think there's a lot of administrators that would rather email a student, but not have to work face to face with the student, or they don't like the idea of the pushback that comes, or not being liked or being yelled at or whatever, as opposed to just realizing that's part of the educational process outside the classroom, right?

The second idea in this subfinding centered on WOC creating strong, reliable, and trusting relationships with students, with almost all (i.e., nine) of the participants reiterating those relationships allowed for student learning and, in turn, better management of the interplay among WOC. Malini forthrightly stated, "I have yet to meet any woman of color [in student affairs] that doesn't have strong relationships with students." Savita shared her relational approach when she said:

But they started to escalate. . . . And I reached out to a couple of students I had a relationship with who, I thought, would be kind of be the ringleaders, and said, "Hey? Can we just talk? I'm not trying to disrupt what you are doing. I want to make sure you're safe. I want to make sure that you have what you need to feel supported on campus. "

Savita spoke about her ability to connect with a group of students because she had already carved out relationships with them. Neelima also intertwined her own identity into this working, stating that being a WOC allowed her, and other staff of color, to develop better relationships with students, centered on mutual trust, particularly with marginalized students. Neelima stated:

Where this has helped is because I am a person of color, and I've been leading this team of primarily people of color. . . . It has been really helpful to build trust, with student leaders, right? And leaning into my identity as a woman, as a woman of color has been very helpful to build trust with other underrepresented students.

Finally, the idea of teaching students how to be strategic to understand how free speech policies worked was a major part of this finding, as at least half of the participants shared. Savita stated, "But, I think allowing them to find ways to practice free speech and champion their cause, but also ensuring that we were in compliance;" whereas, Nia simply stated her instructional motto for students was "express, explain, educate." Neelima stated, "We should empower students know what their rights are by the First Amendment, how to protest, how to demonstrate, how to make action." These women showed by example that part of their commitment to the interplay was to incorporate their educational backgrounds so student learning was centered. It also showed the teaching was deliberate and calculated so students could make the most informed decisions. Danielle explained the strategy operationally, suggesting a premeeting as a strategic and relational tool. She said:

If we can impact or change something before they have to do that, let's do it. So that means let's have a meeting because they're upset about something and they're thinking they want to protest. Can we meet about it and just talk about it and see, you know, what can we change? Or how can we impact that?

It should be noted although many participants spoke to teaching strategies, one participant, Sarena, had a more cautious approach, stating WOC needed to be careful about student reception because many students may be skeptical of staff members overstepping.

Subfinding 2.3 Robust Community of Support

Finally, robust community of support was defined as the ways WOC find support, healing, and camaraderie. Recognition of the support systems was a key tool to allow the WOC to manage the heaviness of the interplay work and was precursor for the work. All the women in my study affirmed this need with generalized support systems falling into larger categories. In particular, I was interested in learning about mentorship of WOC for the participants. The findings showed all participants had mentors or supervisors who mentored them; however, not all of them experienced having a WOC mentor. At the same time, all women in my study spoke to the importance of strong WOC connections, whether through mentors, peers, mentees, or affinity groups within their institutions or divisions.

Danielle, as she described being mentored by other WOC, stated, “We need more of this,” affirming that even when mentorship exists, it is usually not enough to support the need. Sarena stated, “My whole career. I’ve sought them out: women, people of color, and especially WOC. I looked up to them.” Savita spoke about a meaningful relationship she was able to develop with a leadership coach who shared similar identities. She said, “And so I had the beauty of having a coach that shared identities with me is that it was all we’d always come back to, what is my North Star here?” The idea she shared emphasized the impact of shared identities on developing character and vision, especially because Savita described the impossibility of a specific situation of managing the interplay where she felt defeated before this coach’s advice.

Concurrently, Neelima and Claudia stated they did not have WOC mentors who specifically helped them manage the interplay, but rather men or white women. Both affirmed those relationships and their advice, support, and guidance. Neelima reflected it was tough to navigate this work without one, stating, “I think that I often think about the impacts of the decisions I make and how . . . and how I will be perceived as a woman of color in the decision I make.” Thus, she was seemingly speaking to a gap she perceived existed even though she still felt supported.

Pivoting to discuss other forms of support, both Keisha and Cassandra referenced different formats for affinity groups or spaces for support. Keisha spoke about a more formalized group that was created at work, whereas Cassandra’s was more of an informal gathering of colleagues. Keisha shared:

A lot of the women on campus . . . within student affairs came together. We were struggling . . . everyone was trying to find connection. And we created a women of color collective . . . but we came together, not just for each other, but also to support the women of color students that we’re supporting.

At the same time, Cassandra stated:

They’re all women of color, and they’re all women who have different identities than me . . . different jobs and different backgrounds . . . it’s literally from relationships with other women of color . . . that then turned into us having relationships specifically talking about diverse issues, issues of inclusion and diversity on campus and our leadership roles, and then feeling safe enough to have these types of conversations with them and to seek advice.

Particularly, it was clear for Cassandra that the women not only form a source of support but also of learning and validation, especially given the informality and ability to choose who was an ally.

Finally, Avery referenced the importance to her of gathering with other AAPI women to process, learn, and reflect. Interestingly, Keisha was the only other participant to specifically name connecting with those women in her ethnicity as a group. Avery reflected:

And other WOC who I engaged with were really . . . Asian American women who . . . were really like the women who are doing work for to Black Lives Matter, supporting and doing Asian's for Black Lives work here . . . and also nationally. So, I really got to talk through a lot of how I understand this work.

Savita matter-of-factly stated:

Some of us have it; some of us have these great networks. Some other folks don't have these great networks. And you can see that in people's resiliency and ability to come back to work.

Savita pointed out the emotional impact of the lack of having this support and the connection to work and specifically, managing the interplay.

It was clear that the WOC leaders in this study needed and sought support from other staff to better understand their roles and their work with the interplay. The participants shared in-depth ideas and perceptions that confirmed the three tools needed to do this work: a nuanced understanding of free speech, approaches to support students, and a robust community.

Major Finding 3: Buried Seeds

The third major finding, Buried Seeds, showed although WOC leaders in student affairs were systemically undervalued and felt an internal conflict with the interplay, they, like buried seeds, developed resilience to push through barriers to embody the interplay. This finding was centered on showcasing the resiliency of WOC leaders in student affairs that emerged in the data. I used this particular analogy because the data from the WOC seemed to show the systemic and individual inequities suppressed and marginalized them and their work. Their data implied their experiences were inequitable and unjust. This example reminded me of the Zapatista (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018) quotation, "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds," inspiring the idea that even if inequities exist, people can find ways to persist. To clarify, using this analogy did not diminish the inequities or uphold these women as saviors, but rather recognized and elevated their resilience and tenacity. Additionally, the analogy included a reference to dismissing a part of someone's identity, which also paralleled data the women shared about how they felt invisibilized in the workplace as WOC. See more information in Subfinding 1.2 that speaks to this concept.

Specifically, the WOC shared many different ideas on how they individually managed the interplay. These examples culminated in a development of three themes. First, they managed by learning how to manage it, then by grappling with the dichotomies of being committed to equity yet having to potentially steward inequitable policies, and then by finding ways to enact the management that resonated with their equity-mindedness. Three subfindings are detailed in the following sections. See Table F3 in Appendix F for details regarding Research Question 3, its findings, and subfindings.

Subfinding 3.1 Learning the How-To

Learning the how-to was defined as the sources where WOC learned how to manage the interplay of free speech and inclusion. Given their positionality in the institution and their identities, the data showed many forms of learning how to manage the interplay. From other people to professional development to modeling it themselves, it was clear education was a vital part of its navigation. Keisha stated:

There was another woman . . . and she would talk about . . . navigating how different issues or things came up. . . . And she's a woman of color. She took me under her wing and was like "Listen . . . you need to speak up. You're dealing with a lot. Let us know if you need any help."

In this example, Keisha spoke about how she was not just mentored by a WOC, but also encouraged to share her opinions. Many of the women explained part of their learning came from being given opportunities by WOC. Savita spoke to her experiences with another woman of color, noting the varied racial difference from a Black woman and being able to observe her navigate the interplay. Cassandra talked about dialogue across difference with other WOC, leading to camaraderie. Savita stated:

And so, [I] learned a lot by watching her navigate it. She's a Black woman, so it's a little bit different, but [I] learned a lot from watching her be in her full identity, but also understand her role at the university and how she . . . that interplay of affording both of those at the same time.

Cassandra reflected:

They might have just a different perspective that usually leads to the sharing of a different approach or a different belief, that then helps me further in terms of growth, or also helps me feel less alone in the similarities.

From their relationships, it seemed these women learned to stand in their own power rather than just mimic their mentors or colleagues. Savita reiterated how she developed her own style through multiple formats of support, including a mentor, coach, and colleagues. Cassandra, too, implied her colleagues helped educate her so she incorporated ideas she learned into her own management of the interplay.

Neelima discussed learning from coaching others when she stated, "The first few times, I was like, 'Watch me.' And they were like, 'You just go and talk to them?' I'm like, 'They're students. We're not afraid of students people, right?'" She further explained how that helped her clarify her role as a student advocate, a concept that resonated with many other participants.

In a third example of how the interplay was learned, almost all participants shared a majority of their learning came from experience. Claudia asserted:

It's not something that you learn by reading something. I think it has been more of that experiential learning, like being out there and observing rallies, protests, demonstrations, being the one to enforce, to report back, to sort of educate students on the freedom of speech and time, place and manner restrictions.

Whereas Claudia extolled the virtues of experiential learning, Cassandra spoke to the merits of passive learning. She said:

And so, I attended webinars. . . . I wanted to be better informed, kind of going straight to the source and hearing from experts. And so, I got on some mailing lists, too. . . . I try to find ways to get passive information.

Other participants also reported partaking in professional development.

Finally, the women spoke about how they learned from their own histories, cementing that learning was a continual process for them. Sarena spoke to a challenging incident where she encountered gender and racial bias; she stated, “I’ve had lessons starting very early, even way back as an undergrad, as a grad, that has contributed to the way that I work now.” Similarly, Danielle spoke of needing to work with her staff earlier to ensure students had support. She said, “But I still think that there’s ways for us to teach and there’s ways for us to coax and to encourage. So, I’m talking to staff sooner.” Thus, the data indicated the women had multiple modalities of learning and relearning about the interplay.

Subfinding 3.2 Reconciling Roles and Identities

The second subfinding that arose was reconciling roles and identities defined as the challenges that existed in managing the interplay as WOC; this subfinding was essentially critical sensemaking in action. The data in this subfinding documented WOC experiences with ideas like internal conflict, isolation, and complexity. In this section, I purposefully included a quotation from each participant to amplify how they used critical sensemaking in their day-to-day work.

Many participants spoke of an internal conflict that seemed to rise as they were approaching this work, one where they struggled to hold both their equity values and manage free speech. Malini framed it as if multiple requests were asked to be done at the same time. Malini questioned:

How do we let them talk and engage with each other, but also be an open and inclusive community, while managing all of these other requirements that institutions do or don’t want us to have, or that the government currently doesn’t want us to have?

Cassandra, in the meantime, provided her solution to manage the internal conflict when she said, “So it’s a little bit more compartmentalized, whether it’s my job, whether it’s who I am as a person, if I would always be like this, I don’t know, but I have compartmentalized a little bit more.” Both reiterated complexities other participants spoke of when sitting with ideas that seemed to weigh on them and how they regulated themselves.

Meanwhile, many of the women spoke to the contradiction that existed in the work itself. For example, Neelima spoke about its existence and impact on staff and colleagues when she said:

We have an ethos of social justice in our profession, and it’s a contradiction for us to say we’re all about DEI and we’re going to stand here and let hateful words be said. And that’s hard. It’s hard to explain to staff, too. I think it’s hard to explain to particularly the ones that are doing equity related work, because it’s contradictory to all the work that they do.

Another view point within this subfinding was on the impact of policies on students because free speech policies often harm students, particularly students of color and/or marginalized students. Danielle reflected:

As a woman of color, it's there is this, this interplay of, I really want our students to have freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and I really want for that policy not to harm them. That's a real struggle point,

Claudia on the other hand, homed in on how time, place, and manner (TPM) policies impact not only students but the staff enforcing them. She said:

I think right now, and it's really hard to say that freedom of speech exists in our campuses when there's definitely a lack of viewpoint neutrality and how they would like us to enforce some of our time, place, and manner restrictions.

Two women in the study spoke to the impact of managing the interplay on students with the same identities as themselves, referencing how they internally were impacted, but also how students called them out. Though a small number, I included this finding in this section because of the deep impact of their own identities on this interplay. Nia recalled a conversation about why hate speech was allowed to a Black student when she said, "And when you share an identity with somebody and having that conversation is a very difficult role." She shared it as an example of how the interplay could target a core identity. Meanwhile, Savita spoke candidly about how a South Asian student conversed with her during a protest. She said:

And a South Asian graduate student looked at me and was like, "You're [South Asian]. Your parents are immigrants. How can you be here working for the administration? You're just a Brown puppet for the Magnolia University administration." And when it's your own people, it's like a whole different kind of assault on your character.

Savita shared this complexity of trying to help students, preventing escalation with campus police; yet, the student did not understand her strategy and ability to mitigate circumstances. For both Savita and Nia, the experiences also seemed to evoke sadness and misunderstanding.

At the same time, both Sarena and Claudia provided examples of a double bind in their roles: students' acceptance and rejection of them due to their identities as WOC. Sarena revealed:

I'm the person [who] holds and implements policy and hold students accountable. I'm the man. Well, I certainly do not look like the man in any way. And so, I think students, sometimes they don't know quite how to relate to me. I do think that it works to my favor in many ways, because there's a cognitive disconnect sometimes, of I'm not easy to come at because I don't look like the man, so I get a little bit of a buffer initially. . . . I think my approach, my identities, helps me disarm people in general, especially students who are really adamant about coming at me. And then sometimes it doesn't matter. . . . [I've] certainly been doxed and called things and written about in the paper and things like that.

Claudia expressed:

So, I think when they see a woman of color . . . that is not a white person or they can see that I sort of, I'm an ally, because there's not always a Mexican group or Latino group, right? It'll be another group, another underrepresented group, sometimes they do trust and see us as support, but I've seen the opposite and less empathy to my role when is and I'm just gonna name it when it's white activist. . . . But, I will tell you that I have received some microaggressions, even from the underrepresented groups, after they get annoyed.

Their examples presented how social identities influenced student behavior. Sarena spoke about her positionality as it intertwined with her identity causing confusion, perhaps as students found it unexpected to have a woman of color in such a role. She then divulged that her identities also helped put students at ease, which may be different from either men or white women in similar roles. At the same time, she shared her identities were not preventative of cynicism or targeted aggression. Claudia also spoke of experiences that allowed her to gain trust with both Latinx students and other students of color, from time to time, though not always. For her, distrust came from white students to the point of reacting with bias. These dichotomies were intertwined with both their and students' identities, with intersectionality playing a major role.

Finally, the other concept in this subfinding was the challenging nature of the work. Keisha reflected on the challenge existing in holding a dual role, specifically as a staff member who worked with an identity center. Keisha reflected:

I think there are pockets of where our institution counters its inclusion practices. And I think being a director of the [Identity Center], I see that even more than most people. I only say that because I do walk into spaces where there's a lot of disconnect within regards to diversity, equity, inclusion across campus.

Sarena focused on how the interplay issues were connected to identity and humanity, stating, "And I think that is the most challenging part of working in a university and we're trying to contend with these issues, is that these are not just cognitive, cerebral, rational, logical, analytical issues. They're deeply personal, emotional." Avery spoke to the challenge of supporting all students as part of her equity framework. Avery stated:

It's about reconciling my own . . . values. And my own political beliefs. . . . The real interesting thing is that in my role, I've had to support students who I align with politically, and then also students who I deeply disagree with, but it's not . . . I don't have a choice. So, this inclusive mindedness, this equity mindedness, also extends to students who I deeply disagree with . . . as someone who's committed to equitable practices, you don't get to pick and choose. And in order to be successful in our work, you have to remember this.

In this section, the data indicated that doing this work was complex, discerning, and complicated. It was complex because WOC had to allow for instances that may harm the very groups they were trying to protect. It was discerning because they needed time and space to critically think through issues but were not always given agency to make final decisions. It was complicated because it occurred within an integrated system of policies, laws, and environments. Thus, it was clear critical sensemaking was such an integral part of the work that these WOC did to better understand what happened and why it happened, always considering it with a lens of power and privilege.

Subfinding 3.3 Embodiment of the Interplay

The final subfinding was the embodiment of the interplay, or the ways WOC operated in the interplay to ensure they were committed to equitable practices. Some methods to do so included being relational, making values-oriented decisions, listening, and speaking from their background and identities. The subfinding showed how participants used strength, resilience, and strategy to accomplish their work.

Part of the participants' strategy in doing this work was to embody tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) as a person who slowly works to make change within an organization. The participants evoked this concept at different stages of embodiment. Keisha spoke of it with some uncertainty of when and how to use it when she said, "I think understanding the limits that we can push the institution. I think that's one of the things where I struggle . . . not truly knowing if it's appropriate or if I might lose my job." Savita both presented a question and then provided her reasoning to show her acknowledgement of being the only person of color in a space of power. Savita posed:

I think the place that I sat was, which battles do I fight that keep me at this table?

Because I'm the only person of color at this table, and if I'm not here, these students are going to get arrested.

Conversely, Nia and Sarena offered models of how they used their tempered radicalism. Nia spoke to a more generalized approach, whereas Serena offered a specific time when tempered radicalism was used. Nia stated:

I agree that there are likely some contradictions, and I have seen my role as the quiet revolutionist, I like to consider myself to change the systemic pieces that I would not have been able to change had I been in a different role. . . . I will also say the quiet revolutionist in me also is very intentional about, as I'm explaining why certain things can't be done . . . putting it into a way for them to understand where their empowerment does lie.

Sarena shared:

That way that we did this interplay very quietly, [this] group of people will never, ever, ever get the acknowledgement or the credit they deserve. And that's not what they do it for. And it has to actually be that way by design, right? Because if the behind the scenes of this interplay was revealed for what it was it would not work again. It would be gaslighted. It would be thrown under the bus. It would be pulled into courthouses for litigation.

Both women confirmed the importance of careful and measured lengths that WOC negotiated as they encountered instances where their values may not have intertwined with institutional decisions, but they were compelled to find a way to support students. They did this by carefully constructing pathways, making nuanced decisions, and making tiny incremental changes that helped slowly change student impact, and thus, the institution. Neelima gave another great example of this when she said, "You know, with a little bit of practice, you figure out where do the after conversations have and the backdoor ways to get what you need."

Additionally, in this subfinding, many of the women spoke about leading from their identities, tapping into them as a source of strength and connection to the work. Part of their identities connected to ancestral roots or to their strong relationships. For example, Cassandra powerfully stated, "I see my positionality as a strength and something that can be leveraged. I think sometimes just looking like I do and being who I am in certain spaces does impact conversations. I think it does for all of us." Avery compared her identities as almost a super-strength power, making her very different from other staff. Avery said:

As a woman leader of color, you have to understand . . . the thing you have to understand by me is that my experience, my identities, inform my abilities to make these decisions and are used much more holistically than my counterparts. But I only

bring one perspective. . . . But this is ultimately the value of diversity in administrative roles in higher education.

Some spoke about serving as translators for one student community to another, or from students to cabinet-level administrators. Nia provided feedback she received from a student when she said:

I had one that told me 2 years later, like “I was not happy with the some of the answers we got, but I am so grateful that you all continue to listen to us, to be willing to speak to us, to make time and space for us, and not hold against us that we were so angry and that we were so frustrated.”

Another area participants discussed was how their ability to deescalate situations helped them embody the interplay. They approached students strategically to help them understand their roles and emphasized deescalation as a learned skill. Claudia elaborated:

Last, it felt very successful that we were able to de-escalate any issues that the students were successful with and what in their freedom of speech? It was. . . . We had many, many of those situations, wherever activities or events felt like, wow, okay, that could have been worse, like we did a good job at educating, supporting.

Finally, participants provided numerous examples of WOC acting strategically. Danielle stated, “And that’s how I’m trying to navigate the system, by asking those questions of the people who can really influence the process.” Her emphasis on speaking to positionality when she may not have it exemplified this subfinding of using tools at one’s reach to deliberately try to adjust part of a system.

The embodiment of the interplay was an important subfinding to help solidify how the women in my study approached their work. Through tempered radicalism, their identities, their relationships, and deescalation, they were able to forge a template for approaching this work. This finding, Buried Seeds, showed the importance of understanding how WOC develop resilience to push through barriers to embody the interplay.

Major Finding 4: Tilling the Soil

The fourth and final major finding, Tilling the Soil, was about the need for institutions to make commitments that centered equity, inclusion, and WOC voices to enhance the role of WOC in managing the interplay. This finding showed, for institutions to ensure equity, they had to systemically commit to supporting WOC’s leadership alongside the development of students. The analogy was rooted in the idea that the fertile ground of the university needs to be tended and taken care of for the institution to flourish, with both these WOC leaders and students being recognized. This concept comes full circle with other findings to show how all the components come together to support a living ecosystem of the interplay. The concept of tilling soil is laborious; thus, this finding included data showing the high expectations to encumber this commitment.

My original research question that correlated to this finding was centered on what WOC needed to do to influence their institutions. The data from the women in my study revealed the desire for partnership where the institution supported the interplay. The women themselves had already fulfilled their duties to help an institution commit to equity. Given this finding, I tweaked the question so it helped clarify the bidirectional work. The data also revealed institutional commitments supported student engagement and learning alongside the systemic support for staff. The call for this partnership manifested in two subfindings, detailed in the

following sections. See Table F4 in Appendix F for details regarding Research Question 4, its findings, and subfindings.

Subfinding 4.1 Enactment of Equitable Interplay

Enactment of equitable interplay includes the systemic commitments universities must uphold to move toward equity. These typically come from an institutional level from university leadership. In developing this subfinding, I found counter-initiatives to the earlier findings on challenges (Subfinding 1.2) and hidden outcomes (Subfinding 2.1), and those replicating the need for support systems (Subfinding 2.3).

The first idea in this subfinding was regarding the concept of practices not policies, a statement I developed because it resonated with almost all of the participants, emphasizing equitable leadership includes honing practices over redesigning policies. The following three examples spoke to the nature of this concept in varying ways, focusing on empowerment, dialogue, and education as those practices. Additionally, the data showed these practices should come from both student affairs staff and university leaders. Neelima stated:

I think also; so, this isn't redesigning a policy. I think this is more about a practice. I think as a practice, we can do a better job of giving, advertising, educating, engaging students on what are their rights . . . we should empower students [to] know what their rights are by the First Amendment, how to protest, how to demonstrate, how to make action.

Cassandra shared:

I don't think that we can policy our way out of these things. . . . No one ever looks back and be "That rule really helped me empathize with this person totally different from me." . . . I don't think it's a policy. . . . I think the antidote is actually building capacity for dialogue.

Claudia stated, "We need to have time, place and manner restrictions to protect the educational environment, but we also need to be more open to the educational approach to engagement in free speech, if it is violating time, place and manner." In this example, she meant policies were helpful, but only to a degree. They always need interpretation to allow for student success. Although Sarena agreed the approach should be centered on practices, she also suggested policies still need to be redesigned. She said:

The reality is a lot of time, place, manner free speech policies look good on paper, but when you're trying to apply them in real life, there's so many holes and gaps. And so, when you have somebody who can think like, "Okay, if I was to occupy that building, what would I do? How would I get around this rule?" And so that's where I would start, and redesign free speech policies.

Sarena suggested bringing unique and creative ideas to the center of redesigning free speech policies by sourcing material from those who were previously student protestors. Her method countered Danielle's earlier concern in Subfinding 2.1 of a committee making a decision without having the direct experience of student protest.

Another part of enactment of equitable interplay centered on institutions establishing methods such as systems thinking or crisis management as an approach to equitable interplay. Specifically, Avery chose to employ the idea of systems thinkers thinking slowly. Avery shared:

And what I mean by that is I slowed everybody down in creating a process and a system of evaluating free speech activities and determining how to properly resource in terms of support when these situations were developing and when they became full blown.

By using this method, she was able to preemptively able deescalate and create a plan for the future, not in the middle of a crisis. Though only a handful of participants referenced systems thinking ideas, I noted this concept in the findings because it serves as a best practice.

Additionally, many participants gave examples of shared governance working as an equitable approach for institutions. Shared governance gives everyone a voice and a seat at the table, a missing factor in other findings. Danielle suggested:

It just needs to be everybody there. It needs to be faculty, staff and students, and the Board of Trustees needs to be there, and alumni could be there. Everybody needs to be there to have an opportunity to be part of the conversation. I think that's what's missing as we're making these policies in the absence of feedback. And I know I'm a collectivist, so I love let's all talk about this.

Research has shown Danielle's reference to collectivism is a value of WOC (Squire et al., 2023); thus, her suggestion was reflective of her identities. Avery spoke about bringing different leaders of units together as a form of accountability. Avery recounted:

But the system that I created was there were three people, the chief diversity officer, the vice president of student affairs third, and our chief of university police, who met weekly to talk about things that were on the radar. . . . there was always this, checks and balances. And then my role as dean of students was not as a decision maker. I was able to facilitate those discussions as the person, who would help keep them on top, to help make sure that they thoroughly talked about decision making, that there was never any kind of one person was taking over.

Avery's process not only brought leaders together to integrate their ideas in an equitable way, with all voices being equally heard, but she also ensured they could hold each other accountable.

Malini's angle was, although WOC want and should have seats at the table, the burden cannot be on them alone. Rather, she recommended others be trained to be equitable partners, so when WOC leaders cannot join the table, the skills in centering equity are still retained in conversations. Malini shared:

To make this a more equitable practice for the institution, you train everyone else to be, people that students want to go to tell these concerns to so it's not just the WOC hearing all of this, not just the WOC who are sitting at the table to advocate for their students, because if they're not there, then who's doing it, and we can't be everywhere on our campuses.

Malini was referring to shared governance but in an atypical way: shared collaboration of not only hard skills of ideating and envisioning, but also the soft skill of managing the interplay, by listening and being relational. Savita, too, encouraged relationships to be developed at all levels, rather than just left to the WOC. Savita asserted:

The WOC in these spaces are the only people of color are the only people with relationships with students of marginalized identities, and it would behoove university administrators who are white, cis, whatever, straight, to have relationships with these students, because those relationships go much further to like find the balance of this intersection than any policy protocol program that we can create.

Similar to Malini, Savita's statement requested a level of comfort and approach where cabinet-level leaders develop trusted relationships with students to alleviate tension. Finally, Cassandra

also offered cabinet-level leadership should address how to unburden staff on the ground responding to the interplay. Cassandra offered:

I would encourage leadership to . . . taking stock of who is leading this and what they look like and their lived experiences are, so that they can make some decisions around either rotating or who's always taking point. I think they just need to be observant and then use that data to make sure that they're not burning out some of their really qualified, competent people.

Though staff senates were included in a broad definition of shared governance (McNaughtan et al., 2025) and most participants had access to some form of staff governance, these bodies are rarely primed for making the types of decisions considered with the interplay.

Another important area within enactments of equitable interplay was building autonomy and trust in the midst of the interplay. This practice would help till the soil and create more institutionalized commitments to the interplay. Claudia stated, "Campus leadership is trusting in us as a response team to do the education, the outreach, to navigate the interplay of the policies versus the free speech and like letting us be very situational." Thus, she said when expert staff on the ground are trusted to have some nuance and context, it allows for more equity, learning, and students achieve their goals. Nia stated, "Get out the way and let us do good work. . . . And I think it's time for us to take a minute to learn people to be very intentional around the intersectionalities that they hold," accounting not only for trust but also self-education about intersectionality for both the WOC and of the people in charge.

Malini made a different point for leadership to understand WOC decisions were made with discernment, reflection, and students in mind, and for leaders to trust those decisions. She said, "Trust that students are coming to us to tell us what's going on . . . trust that when we push for something, request something, ask for something, we are doing it because . . . we are advocating for our students." Nia spoke to the benefits of that trust: when staff are trusted, they succeed, and the university succeeds. She shared, "Being positioned at institutions that will allow me to flourish in that way, understanding that it will actually be a benefit to the institution holistically." This concept is significant because it emphasizes the need to invest in WOC for their individual growth and development, but also to allow the institution to be a catalyst for change.

Finally, this subfinding suggested universities need to be more inclusive of WOC leaders' voices, supporting their growth and development systemically, honoring who they are, regardless of if leadership looks different when they are in charge. Keisha stated:

So, I think that there's a type of leader that they are used to seeing. But they haven't seen an Indigenous woman leader, like being the first Native woman of the [Identity] Center. I don't mean to come off a certain way, but I'm bringing a lot of my community. I'm walking on the shoulders of a lot of my ancestors. . . . But they've done their share of work now I feel it is my turn, and so I think they should get used to the work of WOC, the passion that we bring.

Keisha's quotation laid the foundation for how full acceptance of WOC at the table as full partners should look like, culminating in a clear view of how equitable interplay is enacted.

Subfinding 4.2 Student Outcomes

The second subfinding was student outcomes that result from full commitment in moving toward equity. They typically affirm the institution's mission and goals. Many

institutions stated they sought to develop students to be citizens who would change the world. This finding suggests, to do so, the institution must make a commitment to equitable interplay. Three paths to this commitment were shown in this subfinding.

According to the women in my study, global citizenship seemed to be deeply intertwined with equitable commitment to the interplay. Participants spoke about protest in particular being a commitment to democracy, civic engagement, freedom, and rejecting authoritarianism and tyranny. Avery, Sarena, and Claudia all spoke to the timeliness of this issue and importance of an imperative commitment to these students' education. First, Avery shared:

For me personally, I deeply believe that this is . . . we're at a crossroads . . . we have students who are leading our college strategy who are less experienced in having the time and a space to think about what it means to engage in protests at its basic level The broader impact of that in terms of our society and our democracy is at stake if we can't cultivate, those opportunities for freedom at colleges real long term wise, we are failing students as American citizens forward.

Sarena similarly offered:

It's so much more than that. It's really, to me, a symbol of a healthy democracy. If a country and a government and there's a direct tie and connection between the environment that we set up for students and what happens in our government

Claudia confirmed:

I understand the power of student activism and how it has played out in history to sort of dismantle the systems of oppression, right? And if we want to be a campus of inclusion or diversity, equity, and inclusion, and if we want to continue with those priorities, we need to understand the importance of student voice and how they're navigating their experiences, whether it be campus experiences or world experiences, right?

These three examples painted a picture of the importance of thinking beyond the current context on campus. Similar to academic goals of preparing students for potential professions, cocurricular experiences also prepare students for their futures as leaders, citizens, and stakeholders in the world. These compelling data confirmed the need for institutional leaders to understand the necessity of protest as a form of education rather than just as a right. It also served as a reminder for administrators that fear of protests can limit the education and growth of students.

Another area that belonged in this subfinding of student outcomes was education. As discussed in the literature review, a goal of free speech is allowing everyone to have a voice. Malini shared:

An ethos that I developed a long time ago . . . on a simplified level, it's that I came to Student Affairs to get every student to critically think about their beliefs . . . I want you to be able to hear other people's beliefs, and then I want you to make a decision on your beliefs, and at that end, that decision can end up different from mine, but I need you to at least critically have thought about it.

For many WOC, an outcome of giving everyone a voice was to allow for critical thinking and their commitment to equity, in support of all students. In the previous example, Malini spoke firmly about her worldview. Education, through dialogue was another suggestion, with

Cassandra having stated an outcome when she said, “Building capacity for people to get to know each other, building that capacity out to engage with different ideas and different people, is how we get there.” Her vision for dialogue was also clear. Earlier, I shared Nia’s experience of getting feedback from a former student that they appreciated a tough lesson (see Subfinding 3.3). She continued that thought and shared her reply to the former student when she said, “And I often tell my students, I said, ‘Now you have a gift that you get to give to others because you were given that grace, I hope that you can pass that forward as well.’” Her reaction and sentiment to this student showed the work of the interplay was delicate and nuanced but with careful deliberation, resulting in a lasting impact on the student’s collegiate experience and their future selves.

On the other hand, though Savita understood and promoted the idea of dialogue as an outcome of this work, she questioned if it could be inclusive and equitable. Savita stated:

I think allowing students to say here’s what I’m struggling with, or here’s the thing, or here’s whatever, and learning how to have dialogue around that is a better skill building than anything we could do, particularly in this day and age. But I think, how do you do that in a way that’s inclusive, in a way that aligns with equity?

Thus, although participants agreed on what student education outcomes should look like, the paths to get there were more varied, nuanced, and questioned.

A final area of student outcomes was making a difference in communities. Many of the participants argued because cabinet-level leaders tended not to want protest to occur, students could be deterred from becoming passionate, caring people who want to make a difference. Neelima proclaimed:

And we have students who care, and it’s my job to help them care, right? Even if I don’t agree with what they care about, I have to help them be successful in caring. And that’s awesome. We have students who care, isn’t it our mission to graduate, civically engaged and minded people into the world, right? This is our job. Let’s help them do this.

The strong argument from Neelima was universities should embrace protest in the same way they embrace persuasive essays or debates in the classroom. An equitable commitment would be one that promotes protesting. The data were clear in this subfinding, showing student outcomes were intrinsically connected to the goals of equitable interplay and leadership’s commitment to them was paramount to move forward.

Overall, Tiling the Soil findings solidified the existence of a need for systemic commitments from the institution to ensure there is a path toward equity as the interplay is involved. Specifically, these commitments need to support both WOC leaders in student affairs and students so they can experience navigating the interplay more equitably.

Minor Finding: Does Identity Make a Difference?

This research had one minor finding not directly connected to the research questions, but important to share and shed some light on. Given the study focused on WOC, their identities, and intersectionality of those identities, it was important to consider how they affected the research. In particular, drawing from the literature review, it was important for me to consider how each ethnicity among WOC was considered in the data. Across ethnicities, many of the women discussed being “the only” in a room or space. Though research has shown people from different ethnicities experience isolation or other negative experiences differently (Anderson, 2021; Maramba, 2011; Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021), none of the women

delved into that concept specifically. Rather, they gave similar answers to feeling isolated and alone. Though I separated out the four groups (i.e., AAPI, Black/African/African American; Latina/Hispanic; SSWANA) with more than one participant, triangulated, cross-referenced, and separated the data, I could not find any significant differences in their roles with the interplay, especially as I specifically considered their approach, ideas, or experience. Perhaps, if the dataset was larger or if there was more representation, the differences would have been more apparent. Additionally, perhaps due to the nature of the study drawing people who identified as WOC, these participants attributed experiences to the WOC identity more so than their ethnic identity.

The only identity that produced significant differences was participants' years of experience, particularly students with less experience, both in the number of years in the profession and estimated age. Both Malini and Keisha were director-level participants who were right at the 10-year minimum required to be in the study. All the other participants, save one, had over 20+ years, with the final participant right under that 20-year threshold. They were also mostly in their 40s and 50s. Both Malini and Keisha used the word "young" or "young professional" multiple times to describe themselves or to provide contextual descriptions to a scenario. Additionally, Malini stated, "I don't think I've gotten to a senior enough position to feel like I am empowered to make big yes or no decisions in some ways," speaking to their limited experience. Keisha stated, "I know my dean of students has talked about different free speech and stuff that they had to deal with. I'm like, holy smokes, that's what happens when you're in student affairs for decades!" They both seemed to grapple more with the questions of the interplay as opposed to their counterparts who had more definite ideas about how to engage with it. Thus, it seemed the younger and less-experienced group had more uncertainty and questions about managing the interplay than those who were more seasoned. Both examples provided some insight into how varied their experience was from other participants who were more confident and self-assured because they had more experience. However, this finding did not negate Keisha and Malini's approach to managing the interplay, given the powerful data they shared through their experiences.

Conclusion

Overall, the research led to four major findings. The first was *In the Groundwater*, where whiteness was embedded into campus climate causing WOC to make dynamic shifts in their roles. The second was *Sourcing the Tools*, showing that three tools, understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves, are required to prepare WOC for managing the interplay. The third was *Buried Seeds*, showing although WOC leaders in student affairs were systemically undervalued and felt an internal conflict with the interplay, they pushed through barriers to embody the interplay. The final one was *Tilling the Soil*, showing institutions needed to make commitments that centered equity, inclusion, and WOC voices to enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay. Together, these findings spoke to the intertwined nature of the environment in which these WOC leaders worked; the complexities, including harm to them and students, they must work through; and the impacts of that work that affect how universities engage with free speech and inclusion. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications and conclusions based on these findings through the lens of my framework of critical sensemaking and systems thinking.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study examined how women of color (WOC) leaders in student affairs, who have managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. The interplay was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities. The findings provided a foundation to draw several implications and conclusions for this research. Implications imbedded those ideas with other current and relevant research, embedded concepts, and their own interpretations (Bloomberg, 2023). Conclusions formed abstractions from findings to provide deep and broad connectivity (Bloomberg, 2023). This chapter revisits the embedded concepts of critical sensemaking and systems thinking, provides a review and analysis of the findings in the form of implications, and shares several conclusions of this research. The chapter culminates with a chapter conclusion.

Review of Embedded Concepts

Two concepts influenced this research: the theoretical framework of critical sensemaking and systems thinking. Both are referenced to ground the implications. Critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010) considers how to make meaning of an experience or incident with a critical lens. The interconnection between a lone actor's efforts with power and privilege in a system alongside sensemaking centers identity construction as one of the most foundational aspects of the framework. Additionally, Taylor and Williams (2022) argued power and privilege must examine both intersystem and intrasystem with a focus on marginalized people. Essentially, this framework asks, how did this happen and what does it mean, adding a lens of identity, power, and privilege.

A systemic approach requires strategic thinking for both short- and long-term decisions (Kahneman, 2013). My research questions focused on how WOC can use their roles to make a system change by influencing their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion in the context of this interplay. This study considered how university leadership, who control those systems, center WOC leaders in student affairs' expertise. Systems thinking and higher education scholarship have upheld similar philosophies; institutions take time to make change (Hurtado et al., 1998) and systems leaders both think slowly as they consider the big picture (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.).

Review of Findings

The following list provides a synopsis of the four major findings, with each corresponding to a research question.

1. In the Groundwater: Whiteness is embedded into campus climate affecting the roles of WOC and causing them to make dynamic shifts in those roles to adjust for the inequities in institutions.
2. Sourcing the Tools: Three precursors, understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves, help prepare WOC for managing the interplay.
3. Buried Seeds: Though WOC leaders in student affairs have been systemically undervalued and felt an internal conflict with the interplay, they, like buried seeds, developed resilience to push through barriers to navigate the interplay.

4. Tilling the Soil: Institutional commitments that center equity, inclusion, and WOC voices enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay.

There was also one minor finding, showing a distinction was not apparent in this particular study between the different ethnic groups represented among the WOC. However, some evidence showed younger and less experienced women had more ambiguity about the interplay. Implications for that finding are folded into the conclusions on WOC camaraderie in the next section.

Implications

According to Bloomberg (2023) and Mills and Gay (2019), implications show how the findings are interwoven to the problem of context and literature, showing layered and rich ideas that also embed a researcher's own ideas, the critical framework, and other research. In my case, I also embedded systems thinking. Synthesized implications from the major findings follow directly after this section.

In the Groundwater

The first finding, *In the Groundwater*, showed whiteness embeds structural racism in campus climate. This emphasis causes WOC to make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequalities in institutions. The implication showed systemic barriers cause heightened values misalignment for the WOC who experienced disproportionate harm in racialized and gendered working environments but they found resilience centered on intersectionality. There were three different subfindings tied to this implication. Two of the subfindings centered on the outside influences on the WOC, with the first specifically focused on the context of the institution and the second on the lived experiences of WOC.

The first subfinding showed systemic barriers cause heightened values misalignment for the WOC. Factors such as anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation, institutional neutrality, donors swaying decisions away from community values, and laws and policies form this foundation. When Hayes-Green and Love (2018) conceptualized the concept of "in the groundwater," they referenced how if one element goes awry in a system, many factors could contribute. However, when many elements go awry, the system is a concern. In this case, that system is a university. P. H. Collins (1993) agreed, suggesting an analysis of modern universities would reveal whiteness and oppression at their foundation.

The second subfinding affirmed WOC experience disproportionate harm in particular with their marginalized and intersectional identities. Burnout, tokenization, gendered racial battle fatigue, stereotyping, and both hyperinvisibility and invisibility compile in this harm. Anderson (2021) referred to these symptoms as systemic burning through, created and perpetuated by the institution. Additionally, many of these are gendered and racialized in a way that is disproportionate to how men of color or white women experience them. Those women in the study who had access to institutional leadership reported being dismissed. Both men and white women in similar situations have what Wijeyesinghe (2021) called social location. Those with a one privileged identity (e.g., white women) lean into their marginalization as women but use their whiteness for power.

The third subfinding focused on how these conditions generate both risk and resilience in WOC leaders in student affairs. Drawn from Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004), a risk and resilience framework shows although both risks and resiliency can both affect an experience, an actor will use resilience to repel risk. For the women in this study, risks such as growing anxious,

masquerading, and concerns about doxing intertwined with resiliency found in freedom dreaming, advocacy, and empowerment. Participants centered their identities of race and gender, using intersectionality as a tool of resiliency and paralleling Pasque's (2014) scholarship. This was their form of resilience as well.

Still, the foundation of these subfindings centered on whiteness. Whiteness is a discourse, systemic structure, and combination of habits and behaviors that center on the failure to recognize racial inequity ingrained both historically and contemporarily (E. A. Collins et al., 2020). Cabrera et al. (2017) stated a lack of research existed on staff and whiteness; however, rich information existed at the structural level. Much of the training aimed at fracturing whiteness has not worked historically because it does not shift systems, staying focused on antiracist skills (C. R. Collins & Watson, 2021). Therefore, a systemic approach could help examine the external and internal conditions developed due to historical and structural infrastructures influenced by whiteness. These conditions are not set up to support WOC and consequential marginalized students. The findings showed institutions are not purposefully trying to counter inclusion. Instead, they are perpetuating their own histories: institutions were never intended to be inclusive spaces (Cabrera et al., 2017). If the status quo is maintained, these structures are too ingrained in these systems (and thus in the groundwater) to filter it. Subsequently, as shown by the third subfinding, WOC leaders incorporate their response to these conditions into their roles, adhering and adapting to the conditions by using intersectionality as a tool to both break barriers but also show vulnerabilities. The external factors and lived experiences show a deep impact on their roles, prompting a spectrum of behaviors, attitudes, approaches, and adjustments. However, their reactions were inextricably intertwined with their identities as WOC. In other words, intersectionality was rooted in their experiences.

Reviewing this implication through critical sensemaking, it would have similar verdict. Understanding why campus climate factors and environmental workplace burdens, through a lens of power and privilege, would determine whiteness is indeed foundational in these institutions. Subsequently, WOC make sense of these inequities by using risk and reliance. Though systems thinking alone does not factor structural racism, when an antiracist lens is added, a framework can be developed to address disparities (C. R. Collins & Watson, 2021). C. R. Collins and Watson (2021) proposed a systemic lens of understanding whiteness that focuses on defining (or redefining), designing interventions, and implementing to uphold justice. Both critical sensemaking and systems thinking serve the idea that WOC's roles are deeply impacted by embedded inequities yet can forge a path forward.

Sourcing the Tools

The second finding, Sourcing the Tools, evidenced that three tools (i.e., understanding how free policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves) are required to prepare WOC for managing the interplay. There were three different subfindings within the finding and its implication. One showed invisibilized aspects of free speech policies exist. They impact campus life by inequitably targeting marginalized people. The women in the study shared ideas like viewpoint neutrality are created by those in power, and thus, benefit those in power. They also shared examples of varying access points to speech vis-a-vis resources like money, power, and representation. Repressive legalism transpired in this finding, showing how harm and degradation occur when policies are

upheld over humanity (Epstein et al., 2024). Pointedly, Ben-Porath (2020) noted the importance of distinguishing between speech about rigor, scholarship, and intellectualization and speech meant to provoke, target, and harm others. If the academy purports truth seeking, then the latter type contradicts the very essence of most academic spaces because it tends to be based on hate and misinformation and rarely has scholarly backing.

The second subfinding was about the approaches WOC employ to educate students, ensuring they can be capable leaders who have equitable access to correct information. Approaches such as sharing resources, carving out strong relationships, and promoting the developmental nature of protests create pathways for students to have tools to approach the interplay. These women were focused on teaching strategies to students so they can make holistic decisions, supporting the idea of intentionality on their part to ensure they are prepared. Systemically, Agua and Pendukur (2019) affirmed the need for institutions to support staff who are providing this support for students so as to deflect the burden from students. Additionally, LePeau et al. (2016) suggested staff leverage connections, deploy resources, and serve as allies, though they provide guidance to critically examine allyship. Thus, this finding applies to the WOC in my study as long as their commitment to equity continued to uphold these support practices.

The third subfinding uplifted the idea that WOC need a support system that, in some part, needs to include other WOC as mentors and friends. Support systems took multiple forms, such as networks of other WOC, supervisors, mentors, or even leadership coaches. The through-line focused on needing time to reflect and process with others to understand and approach the interplay. Quaye et al.'s (2024) study upheld the idea of self-care through community, in particular for Black women, as a way to process racial battle fatigue. Both Maramba's (2011) and Sánchez et al.'s (2021) studies focused on how psychological triggers such as invisibility and burnout can be countered by mentorship as a key support system. Women in the current study's yearning for proximity to other WOC was critical, even to those with less access. This finding was affirmed by Boss and Bravo (2020) who promoted the use of (en)counterspaces for identity groups to process together.

These three implications showed parallels between the interplay and the framework suggested by Pope et al. (2019) that encouraged student affairs practitioners to use awareness, knowledge, and skills along with action and advocacy to create social change. As such, the three tools are intertwined with each other, strengthening their collective impact. Simply put, WOC who hold the knowledge that free speech policies have disproportionate impact on marginalized communities and have the strategic skills to ensure students are educated and feel supported can prepare them to approach the interplay. Similarly, they must also have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to seek out, form, and advocate for their own support systems.

Reviewing this finding with a lens of critical sensemaking revealed its embeddedness in the implication. WOC leaders in the study were enmeshed in an inequitable and imbalanced power system that caused them to need these approaches. If the system were more equitable, these approaches would not be needed. Similarly, systems leadership would agree that structure generates behavior (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.). The structural racism inherent in an institution causes certain behaviors, including those of the WOC in this study. Those behaviors include an understanding of the nuances of free speech, support for students, and finding

support for themselves. This finding confirms WOC leaders in student affairs can approach the interplay with intentionality to mitigate these inequities with these tools.

Buried Seeds

The third finding, *Buried Seeds*, showed although WOC leaders in student affairs were systemically undervalued and felt an internal conflict with the interplay, they, like buried seeds, developed resilience to push through barriers to embody the interplay. The implication is they are agentic in managing the interplay if systemic barriers are minimized and they have access to learning, have time for reflection, and have room for interpretation. Three subfindings helped create this implication. One focused on the various methods WOC use to learn management of the interplay. These were sources such as experience, professional development, both WOC and non-WOC, and their own mistakes. It was evident the women in the study could not manage the interplay without understanding these principles first. Women solicited instruction and knowledge to better themselves at their roles. Infused in this finding was their desire to serve all students equitably. This desired outcome was similar to other research on young professionals sensemaking free speech (Duran-Leftin & Duran, 2021), connecting it to foundational learning. WOC's learning embedded a critically conscious lens to ensure understanding of positionality and power, a trait that Agua and Pendakur (2019) validated of student affairs practitioners in these types of roles. The data showed the importance of learning as a part of their resilience.

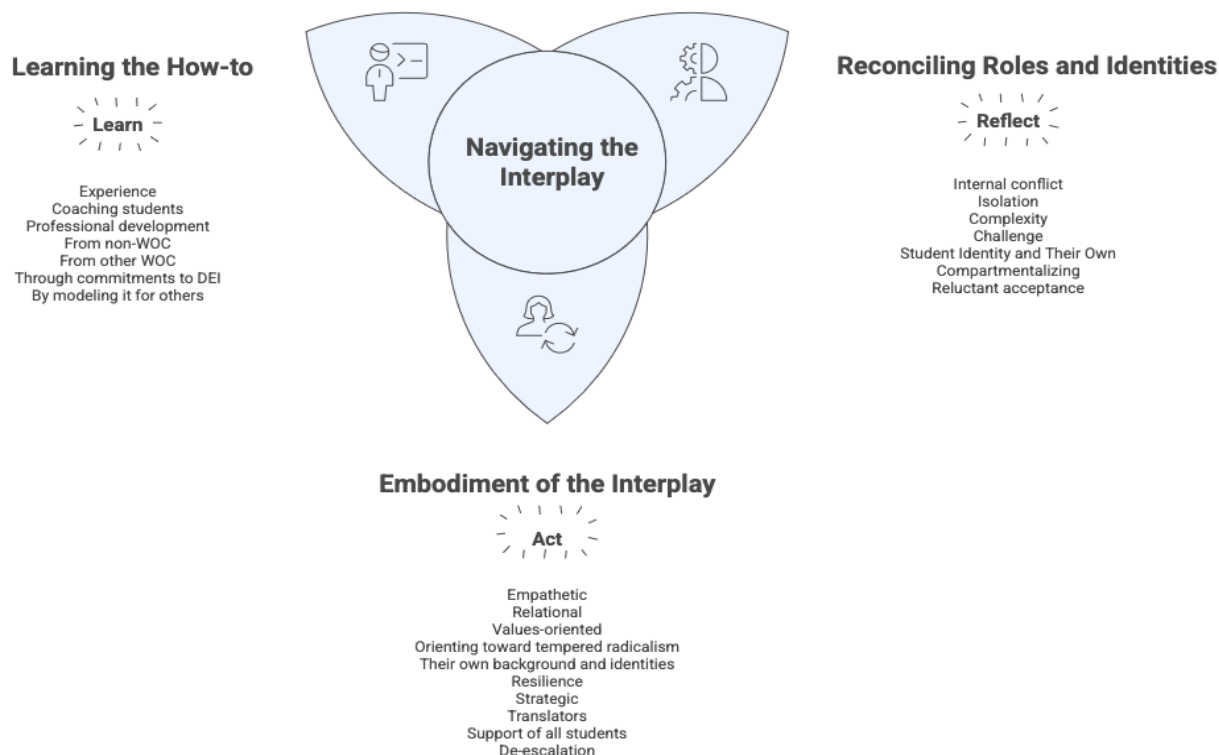
The second subfinding embodied critical sensemaking in action to show how WOC reconciled the interplay of free speech and inclusion through sensemaking of internal conflict, cognitive dissonance, complexity, compartmentalization, and/or reluctant acceptance. This subfinding showed this concept as the crux of managing the interplay; the way that WOC leaders reflect or make sense of how free speech and inclusion can coexist within their minds, their actions, in their institutions, and for their students. In particular, the women spoke about the complexities of managing it when they were interacting with students with shared identities. These interactions left students unsupported, creating a paradox of sorts where WOC felt complicit in the harm enacted on students but needing to also interpret policy. A similar contrast was discussed by Agua and Pendakur (2019), whereby the solution resides in both practitioners and institutions critical analysis, reflection, and strategic change. The implication for this study was WOC may have an access point to execute this because of the intersectionality they hold.

The third subfinding shifted the focus to how WOC leaders enact the interplay by using processes such as empathy, listening, deescalation, being strategic, and code switching. The embodiment of these behaviors showed WOC are primed to manage the interplay and need to be trusted to do this work. They have used a strategy carefully crafted with resources drawn from various lenses, though it is contextualized for the institution. Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004) spoke to this concept in their research, showing once risk (from the second subfinding) is endured, a stronger resilience strategy can be used to help counter the harm. Ramlo (2020) suggested a social justice lens of free speech promoting tenets such as intersectionality and understanding nuanced power structures, which reflect the same foundation as this subfinding. At the core of this subfinding was the culmination of components from the other findings to show small incremental changes in totality can affect a larger system. For WOC, to embody the interplay with that in mind, is to engage in their own resiliency.

The three implications worked in sequential order to create a framework for WOC to lead their units: learn, reflect, and act. Their integration in this framework demonstrates the importance of all three components as equal parts of a whole. Figure 3 demonstrates the framework created from this finding.

Figure 3

Navigating the Interplay Framework



Note. Figure created by author using Napkin AI.

At the same time, this framework emphasizes the need to reflect, or make sense, to move forward. Thus, critical sensemaking is embedded both in the centrality of this finding and this figure. Furthermore, as reconciling roles is critical sensemaking in action, the framework exists in conjunction with actions such as compartmentalizing and juxtaposition. It also centralizes the participant's own identity construction, a core part of critical sensemaking's tenets. Reflection allows for consideration of systemic structures and integration of multiple components (Senge et al., 2012), showing systems thinking is embedded in this approach. Specifically, the women in this study, in their reflections and their actions, considered the inequitable systemic structures and responded to them through reflections such as compartmentalization and actions such as resilience. Additionally, this implication for Finding 3 draws from the two previous findings in its creation. Despite external structures and tough lived experiences that shift roles (i.e., Finding 1) and with the awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy (i.e., Finding 2), WOC develop resilience to navigate the interplay by learning, reflecting, and acting (i.e., Finding 3). This finding is the culmination of the experiences and roles of WOC in the interplay.

Tilling the Soil

The fourth and final finding, *Tilling the Soil*, was about the need for institutions to make commitments that center equity, inclusion, and WOC voices to enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay. Unlike the other findings that directly involved the role of the WOC leaders in the study, this finding centered the actions of the institutions. This finding supported the idea that institutions need to assume their responsibility and commit to interventions so WOC can equitably approach the interplay. WOC cannot use their role to move the institution toward equity in isolation. They need collaborative efforts on behalf of the institution. There were two different subfindings, each with an implication. One focused on the idea that there are certain systemic commitments institutions need to uphold such as including WOC student affairs leader's voices in decision making, understanding policy inequities, considering student voice, understanding intersectionality, and supporting WOC well-being. Moving toward equity cannot occur unless strategies exist to entrench them into the climate and culture of an institution. One way to do this, as suggested by Hurtado et al.'s (2012) multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) model, is to ensure multifaceted pathways on micro and macro levels to enact change. Additionally, Briscoe (2022) found university leadership need to acknowledge harmful incidents (i.e., a component of the interplay), challenge historical constructs, and provide space for staff to process it. My research infused these ideas into more detailed implications for institutional leaders in the next section.

The second subfinding demonstrated powerful commitments to student outcomes for global citizenship, dialogue, and community engagement fulfill the institutional partnership to equitable interplay. This means a dedication to understanding protest, a component of the interplay, allows for learning about civic engagement. At the core of this finding is the need for an institution to support student democratic engagement, which inherently supports the goals and work of student affairs, and thereby, the WOC leaders in student affairs. Institutions serve staff by serving students, and institutions support students by serving staff. This idea was inspired by and mirrored the work of Garcia et al. (2019), who used the word "servingness" (p. 747) to consider the multiple ways Hispanic-serving institutions should serve their Latinx students beyond simply admitting them. Universities need to better champion and serve students' interactions with the interplay of free speech and inclusion.

This implication is tied directly to frameworks in systems thinking. It connects to the idea of multiple components in a system working alongside each other and is guided by the insight of how they work together (Senge et al., 2012). In this context, both WOC and institutional leaders work together in tandem to support student learning without dismissing the crucial role of WOC leaders. Critical sensemaking examines power dynamics to ask why something happened and what it means. As it currently stands, without understanding the power institutional leaders hold in supporting the interplay, institutions cannot move toward equity. To allow for WOC to flourish in their roles, the system institution needs to be fertile, with university leadership ensuring strategies are built from within to support the WOC's approach to the interplay by supporting both them and students in its engagement.

Conclusions

Conclusions show clear ideas about how findings and their implications manifest (Bloomberg, 2023). Bloomberg (2023) also stated conclusions should be interwoven to show impact. Thus, I chose not to separate my conclusions by research questions because the

conclusions cross-referenced multiple ones. Instead, research questions are listed with the conclusions to which they connect. Additionally, the conclusions are broken down into three themes: those for WOC, those about the interplay, and those about institutions.

Conclusions About WOC

There were four conclusions about WOC: their relationship building, their need for other WOC, their agentic approach, and that their voice is limited.

WOC's Relationship Building. The foundational idea of this study was to understand how WOC use their roles to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. Cross-referencing the findings elevated relationship building as the cornerstone of those roles. Relationship building was the key to managing the interplay. Those strong relationships extend to students, student organizations, colleagues, other administrators, campus police, cabinet-level leaders, and even community members. Relationship building was used both as a strategy and as a connection point emphasizing the importance of their flexibility. Due to their positionality, identities, and complex experiences in the institutional system, they can inextricably weave those relationships and their positionality to address the interplay by centering intersectionality. From this interweaving of relationships, WOC have a unique positional and responsive influence on an institution's commitment to equity and inclusion, specifically due to their race, gender, and roles in the institution. Relationship building also evokes a systems approach, as WOC show how they understand relationships in a system to have their own circular causal connection. This implication is connected to all four research questions.

Systems thinking, critical sensemaking, and other scholarship provide strong support of this idea. The strong relationships forged by these WOC perhaps came from intersectional roots. Intersectionality is about relationality (Wijeyesinghe, 2021) and, for those navigating intersectionality regularly, provides a template for how other relational work is executed. Thus, WOC seemed primed to understand nuance, context, and compromise. A similar outlook exists with critical sensemaking, asking why relationships are fundamentally core to WOC's management of the interplay and what that means. Thinking about power and privilege, emotional labor falls disproportionately on women and staff of color (Anderson, 2021). In this research, curating these relationships are inextricably a form of emotional labor.

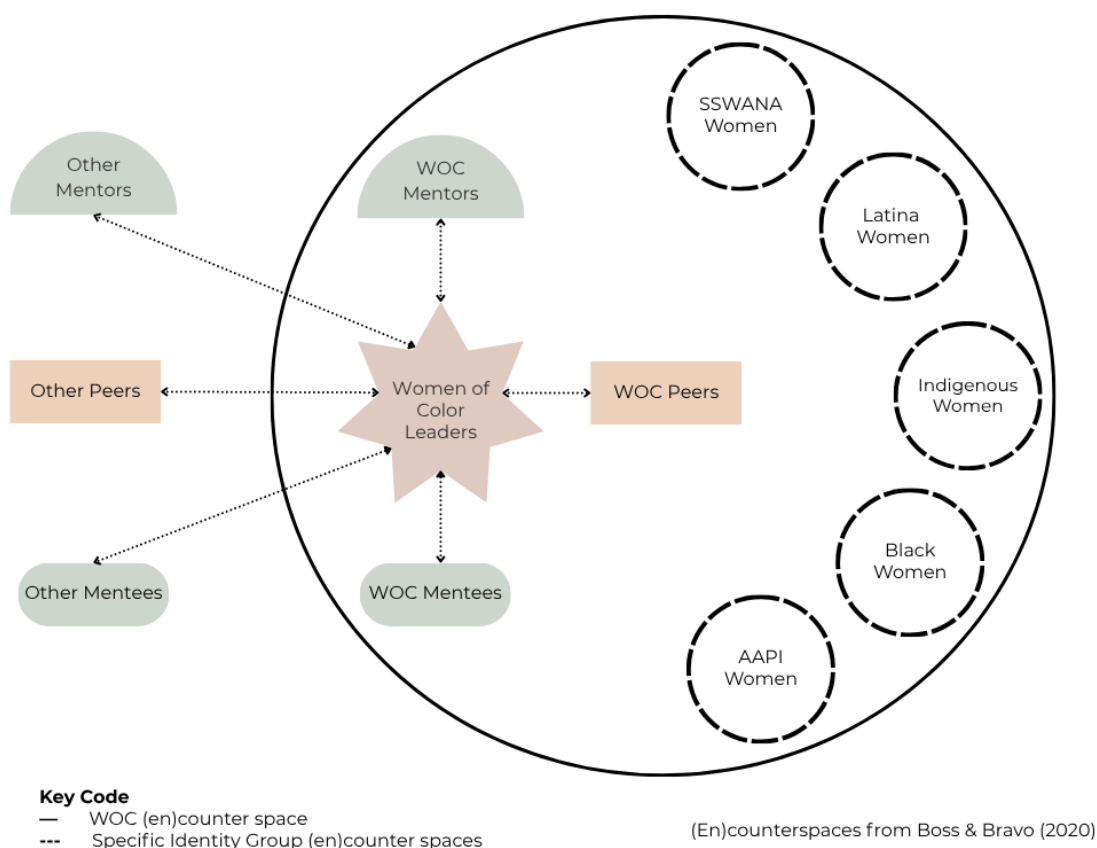
Furthermore, Gigliotti (2019) inferred the core need of relationships to assuage crises in higher education, a context in which the interplay resides. Due to their marginalization, many WOC purposely need to be strategic in understanding their place in the world and how these bonds are related to the effectiveness of their work. Accapadi and Miller (2023) argued harnessing relationships among staff, specifically in regard to the interplay as a best practice, emphasizes the importance of one of these types of relationships. Finally, systems thinking includes the archetype of fixes that fail (Kim & Anderson, 2007), where quick fixes do not solve a systems issue in the long-term. Relationships, however, take time, investment, and attention to develop, thus making them the corollary to that system archetype and showing the importance of relationships systemically.

The Need for Other WOC. WOC rely on mentoring and support systems to manage the interplay. The findings showed many of the WOC had mentors and colleagues who were WOC. Participants also spoke of non-WOC's support. However, given the findings around experiencing challenging environments and administrative lack of trust, this implication elevates other WOC

in those support systems as a way to counter those harms. This implication affirms the camaraderie with other WOC, signifying the need to connect with those who are doubly marginalized in the form of mentors, mentees, or colleagues. This implication is connected to Research Questions 1–3.

It is important for institutions to uplift, center, harness, and those relationships. Included in this implication is the finding that showed significant growth occurred for participants between 10–20 years in the field. That growth is elevated from the connections with colleagues and likely more significant with other WOC. Boss and Bravo (2020) called these group (en)counterspaces, where for WOC, there can be healing, understanding, and a way to push back against racial battle fatigue and gendered racialized labor, two psychological stressors of managing the interplay. Figure 4 shows the importance of support for WOC and highlights the importance of those within WOC, as well as individualized racial groups.

Figure 4
Mentoring Circles



Note. Figure created by author using Canva.

Figure 4 shows the importance of (en)counterspaces not only for specific racialized groups but also for all WOC. The five ethnic groups in the figure (i.e., South Asian, Southwest Asian, and North African [SSWANA] women; Latina women; Indigenous women; Black women; and Asian American Pacific Islander [AAPI] women) were those included in the study. Inclusion

of these (en)counter spaces within a larger (en)counter space was influenced by the work of Maramba (2011), Quaye et al. (2024), and Sánchez et al. (2021) to recognize differences within WOC ethnic groups. For example, hypervisibility manifests as the model minority for AAPI women and as the racial expert for Black women. Many of the WOC in my study explained they informally created (en)counterspaces or affinity groups to process managing the interplay. One participant highlighted not all WOC are committed to equity, serving as a reminder of the complications that can arise in these spaces.

Many scholars have noted this implication. Crenshaw (1991) and P. H. Collins (1993) stated WOC are doubly marginalized and discriminated against, providing the foundation for intersectionality and the need for coalitions to exist for WOC. Pasque (2014) described the need for mentorship for women in student affairs to gain resilience and advocate for themselves. Bazner (2022) stated intrapersonal relationships are deeply affected by institutional and intrapersonal racism and those relationships help to manage it. These scholars' ideas confirmed this research. Critical sensemaking overlaps with intersectionality and the need to understand power dynamics and help mitigate those instances of marginalization. For WOC, support from one another is the answer. Finally, systems thinking is embedded in this implication. One consideration of systems thinking is Stroh's (2015) vision for social change rooted in building trust around "collective and individual impact" (p. 25). The idea supports the idea of supporting individuals for the collective good. Essentially, when WOC seek out and can establish deep connections with other WOC, the institution can move toward equity.

An Agentic Approach. Despite the difficulty of managing the interplay, WOC leaders in student affairs approach interplay to ensure equity is upheld. This study showed women have awareness, knowledge, and tools to manage the interplay with an equitable lens and are agentic in doing so. This conclusion positively reinforces that work, despite the campus climate working against them. WOC leaders work within a system they know is unfair, unjust, and systemically disadvantageous for marginalized people. Their approach is valid from the outset. They understand their marginalized students experience speech that can affect their safety, heighten stress, and harm their mental health, all of which affect the students' learning (Garces et al., 2022). These leaders also understand they themselves are systemically excluded (P. H. Collins, 2015) from the university; but, instead of being displaced, they persist. This conclusion is tied to Research Questions 1 and 3.

WOC leaders create systemic inclusion from within the university to manage all the intertwining needs. WOC leaders must engage in their roles strategically and with intention. One method is through tempered radicalism. This method reflects a desire to change the system from within (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). It also suggests the role of managing the interplay can prepare WOC leaders in student affairs to better navigate other political dynamics in the university. Their approach is supported by multiple systems-thinking concepts, but the two most prevalent are systems leaders think slowly (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.) and use of continuous feedback loops with learning (Stroh, 2015). WOC leaders must think slowly and strategically, especially as they consider their strategy, identities, and values in connection to free policies that may not serve all students. Their work is intentional, thoughtful, and purposeful. Additionally, WOC leaders understand nuance and context in these situations, calibrating decisions from other experiences and institutions, and considering their institutions own leadership values.

Critical sensemaking also plays an important role in this conclusion. Their strategies to approach the interplay work include speaking power to truth in intentional ways that do not hinder their strategy. They understand policies have only been shaped from the majority perspective (Vatts & Dutta, 2020) and continuous learning, engagement, and their own perspective taking are required to shift that perspective and to be better equipped. This approach allows for systematic decentralizing of whiteness, giving agency for WOC leaders in student affairs. WOC are empowered to slowly enact change by voicing their ideas and concerns to help grow an institution.

WOC Voice Is Limited. Academic freedom is an important part of the academy. Many women in the study stated how their lack of academic freedom was a stopgap in how they navigated campus and, in particular, how they navigated the interplay of free speech and inclusion. This conclusion showed WOC have a limited voice that prevents them from full access to the academy as a community member, with professional expertise. Agua and Pendukur (2019) agreed, adding when navigating campus tensions, it heightens this lack of access. This conclusion is connected to Research Questions 1 and 2.

Though free speech and academic freedom are not synonymous and often confused (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2026), staff are deferred from certain activities such as participating in marches or protests on campus (Duran-Leftin & Duran, 2021), signing petitions with their university email, or writing editorial pieces, of which faculty are not. However, this concept may be named or categorized, that distinction is an example of what student affairs WOC leaders are seeking to be rectified. The data questioned the current status quo where faculty and WOC leaders who have commensurate pedigree and experiences do not have an equitable voice in university decisions. Critical sensemaking would determine power dynamics at play.

Scholarship supports this conclusion. Agua and Pendukur (2019) encouraged administration to consider helping student affairs staff to understand rules and policies around free speech, as academic freedom is “regularly undermined” (p. 174) for staff. Considerations for administrators to use academic freedom as a tool, given its responsibility and professional core (Epstein et al., 2024), help affirm the idea that academic freedom does not only need to apply to faculty. Finally, Eckert and Broadhurst (2023) firmly stated academic freedom should be a right that belongs to all student affairs professionals. A lens of critical sensemaking would need to consider the positionalities of faculty versus staff, where faculty have resources, access, and privileges staff do not. Furthermore, taking critical sensemaking to a systemic level of an institution, this concept considers the positionality of the division of student affairs among other units, especially academic ones. Due to their altruistic focus and nonrevenue generation (Franklin & Musoba, 2025), student affairs units are usually the most undervalued and underfunded. Thus, there may be a connection between both the field, the division, and the staff having less positionality. A critical sensemaking lens could reveal all those circumstances produce an imbalanced power structure, where access to academic freedom only goes to the privileged. In systems thinking, a shift like this would be considered one of the positive archetypes. Specifically, the archetype biting the bullet, which includes acknowledging and making significant investments for a foundational change supports this disruption of higher education ways of being. By giving access to academic freedom to WOC leaders in student affairs, their positionality and power are recognized within the system, without shifting the positionality and power of faculty.

Conclusions About the Interplay

There were three conclusions about the interplay.

Impact on Democracy. This study focused on the interplay on college campuses, understanding how WOC leaders in student affairs navigate the interplay so students can thrive in their learning environments. However, this research showed the interplay of free speech and inclusion on college campuses is a microcosm of greater society. What happens on college campuses is not in isolation of the outside world and both have reciprocal relationships with one another (Hurtado et al., 2012). The same way marginalized voices are not given equal access on college campuses serves as a reference for the greater society. With the tools and training on campus, students will be better prepared after graduation, and society will be better because of that connection. As DEI initiatives are being struck across the country (Saul, 2024), using the interplay, as it relates to student activism and protest, as a template for democratic learning and engagement is crucial. It is the classroom in action. That is, academic concepts like persuasion, criticality, and argumentation are enacted and learned through protest. On college campuses, WOC leaders can help mitigate and address these actions on campus, providing tools, resources, and strategies so students know how to engage in activism. Additionally, universities need to acknowledge some students may want to engage in civil disobedience as part of the interplay. This conclusion ties to Research Question 4.

There seems to be hesitancy and a movement nationwide on college campuses, and beyond, to quell protests, in particular after the 2023–2024 encampments. Chemerinsky and Gillman (2026) noted the major differences between peaceful protests and disruptive ones. Considering power and who has access to it, this discussion also seems to target marginalized groups who may be deemed more disruptive. This type of protest tends to be done by the voiceless, as seen in the Civil Rights Movement. Agua and Pendukar (2020) stated the importance of activism serving as engagement within a larger sociopolitical context. One may ask how students can learn and understand how to push back against atrocities if they are not allowed to learn and test it out on college campuses. Applying systems thinking considers the concept of creating a road map in one system to navigate others (Stroh, 2015). Applying that concept to this study shows citizenship and democracy on a college campus provide a roadmap for citizenship and democracy outside of higher education. This concept pairs with the idea of successive amplification (Stroh, 2015), which considers the factors of success that build on one another to create more success. Thus, the success of how protests occur on campus can be considered, allowing protest elsewhere to be successful. This conclusion elevates and affirms students as citizens where WOC are the advocates to ensure activism can continue to happen.

Free Speech Is Not Free for All. One of the core concepts that provoked this research was consideration for how free speech policies and inclusion coexist in a way that allows everyone to have an equitable voice. As it stands at the time of this study, free speech policies do not allow for an equitable voice. Additionally, these policies were revisited and amplified after October 7, 2023. This conclusion is tied to Research Questions 1 and 3.

This study affirmed free speech is a raced concept (i.e., it is not racially neutral; Vatts & Dutta, 2020). Marginalized groups experience free speech differently from other groups due to lack of resources, power dynamics, and racist infrastructures. WOC leaders in the study acknowledged this idea openly and affirmed policies are not intentionally harming groups, but rather they stem from historical structures of oppression embedded in higher education. Thus,

a paradox exists in which universities have currently claimed upholding inclusive practices, but institutions have been rooted in oppression, which is not infrastructurally countered. Ben-Porath (2020) and Moore and Bell (2017) offered that countering speech with more speech is a half-hearted measure to be inclusive. In fact, many participants shared an inconsistency between university values for inclusion and free speech policies. Scholars agreed expanding institutional response to free speech beyond the First Amendment generally has tended to be influenced by legalities rather than by the stated values of an institution (Moore & Bell, 2017). Thus, free speech policies disproportionately cater to those in power.

This conclusion impacts the roles of WOC leaders managing this interplay. First, managing a raced policy has a significant psychological and emotional toll. The WOC shared experiences of shock; harm to themselves; belittlement by administrators and students; and experiencing burnout, languishing, and tolls on their mental health. Eckert and Broadhurst's (2023) research showed similar results of the toll on student affairs staff who responded to activism. Briscoe and Jones (2022) discussed systemic whiteness as being pervasive in universities, embedded in the policies, and trickled down to the experiences of student affairs professionals. The roles, therefore, seemed to be overtaxed and undervalued, stemming from the core of free speech not equitably applying to all.

Both critical sensemaking and systems thinking concepts apply to this conclusion. Applying critical sensemaking determines simply that power dynamics continue to persist. It also postulates whether universities are perpetuating their institutionalized racism via their policies. Considering the policies via systems thinking raises the concept of mimetic isomorphism, the idea that organizations tend to copy one another to maintain consistency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the case of free speech policies, many universities adopted the same free speech policies in the Fall of 2024, showing context was not considered and whiteness was replicated. This study would also argue these decisions were made to maintain the status quo, which still silences marginalized voices, cementing their inequity.

Interplay as Undervalued Gendered and Racialized Labor. This research showed navigating the interplay included mastering empathy and contextual nuance. The labor requires a high emotional intelligence and relationship building, in listening, negotiating, and deescalating. The labor also tends to be done behind the scenes and is values oriented. Many of these forms of labor fall under definitions for emotional labor, or gendered racialized labor (Quaye et al., 2024). Women in the current study reported using their own identities to respond to the interplay. Similar to other gendered and racialized labor (Anderson, 2021), management of the interplay is undervalued in the workplace. Yet, as the current research showed, it is essential labor for institutions. This conclusion states the interplay is both gendered and racialized labor. This conclusion is tied to Research Questions 1 and 2.

Rowe-Allen and Smith (2019) confirmed managing the interplay is additional labor given to student affairs staff, likely WOC. Decisions made about the interplay do not always bring in these considerations and the people doing the work. Intersectionality was one of the core ideas that manifested in this research. Given it can be used as a tool to disrupt power structures, it was a helpful lens to determine the interplay is gendered and racialized labor. Intersectionality helps to break down those power dynamics and infrastructures (Crenshaw, 1991) to understand the effects on identities and, in this case, labor in those roles. Therefore, WOC leaders are primed for intersectional work across both identities and serve as translators. A lens

of critical sensemaking affirms the diminishment of work centered on those with less access to power. Similarly, systems thinking would consider a need to shift mental models (Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.) to uplift the critical labor of the interplay as a central contributor to the institution's mission and values.

Conclusions About Institutions

There were three conclusions about institutions.

Institutions Are Inherently Inequitable. Part of the role of moving an institution toward equity means equity needs to exist for all, including WOC leaders in student affairs. An institution cannot be committed to equity and inclusion unless it is supportive of its leaders, including WOC in student affairs. This research showed whiteness is, and always will be, part of these institutions. This fact needs to be recognized and countered. This conclusion is related to Research Question 1 and 2.

Campus climates are not healthy for WOC leaders to address the interplay, shown through pervasive burnout, gendered racial battle fatigue, and the lack of trust from leaders. Weise et al. (2023) stated heteropatriarchism, whereby considerations outside gender binaries are dismissed and heteronormative male privilege persists (Alim et al., 2020) is embedded in higher education; for women who hold intersectional identities, the effects of that heteropatriarchism are hard hit. Both Accapadi (2007) and Wijeyesinghe (2021) provided evidence for workplace inequities where staff with at one privileged identity and one marginalized identity, such as white women or men of color, dismiss people like WOC who hold both. This research showed WOC needed support systems in their roles managing the interplay as they face systems and people working against them. Managing the interplay is not easy labor to learn as it requires robust support, nuance, and developed relationships, but WOC do it well when they are well resourced.

Neutrality Favors Those in Power. Since 2024, many institutions have chosen to adopt institutional neutrality statements on social issues, causing both alarm and agreement for constituents (Patel, 2025). Prevalent in this research were findings questioning if both institutional neutrality and neutrality of policies can exist in systemically disadvantaged systems, like universities. This conclusion shows neutrality does not exist in nonneutral institutions. Some of the findings were addressed in the conclusion Equitable Practices, Not Policies. However, this conclusion exists on a more systemic level for the institution and its leaders. This conclusion is connected to Research Questions 1, 2, and 4.

Ray's (2019) concept of racialized organizations shows though historically organizational theorists view organizations as race-neutral, "racial processes are foundational to organizational formation and continuity" (p. 48). Institutions are not devoid of this description; therefore, they are also racialized and cannot be neutral. Soucek (2026) stated universities do not have the option to choose to be neutral; instead, they need to connect deeply to their missions. Soucek provided examples wherein institutions make unneutral decisions, like the naming of buildings, centers, and even grants and awards. This study also indicated certain groups have not had that access and institutional neutrality does not exist.

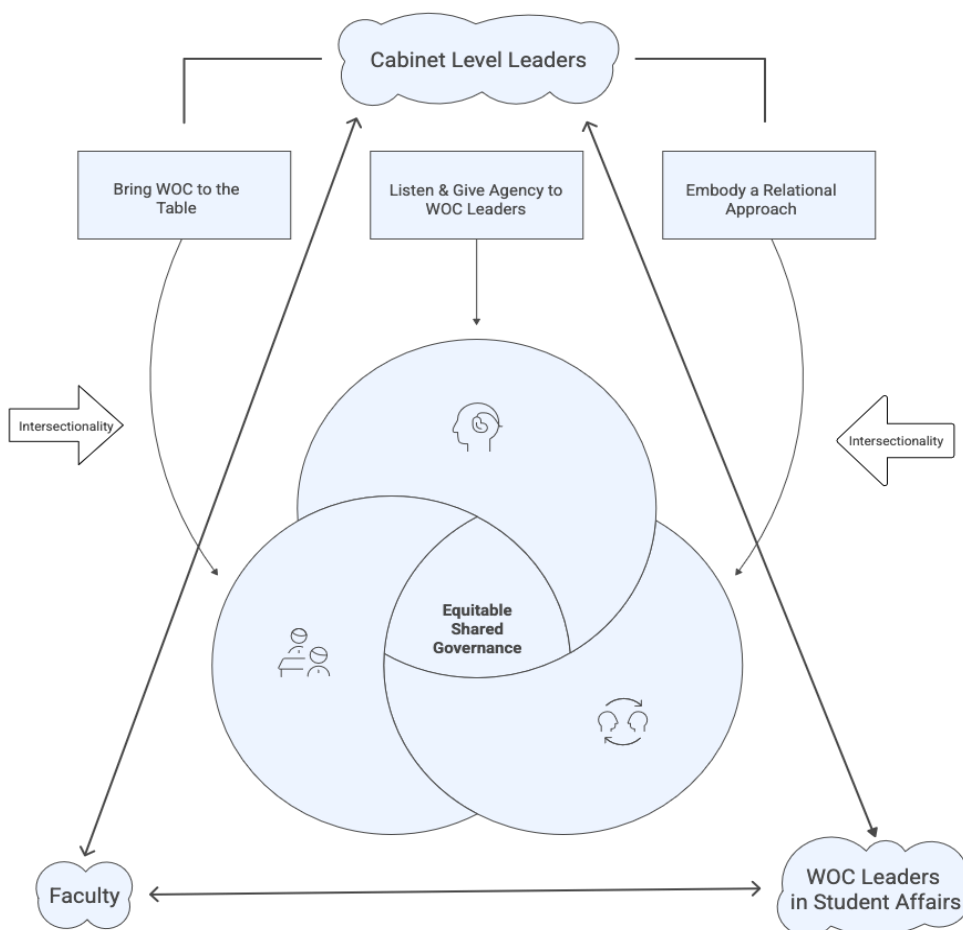
Critical sensemaking would argue it is impossible for neutrality to exist in society anywhere because power and privilege exist everywhere. Therefore, when neutrality is in effect, it is actually an appeasement to those in power. One of the systems thinking principles is everything is connected (Stroh, 2015). This view of how the world works affirms the idea that

an ecosystem is harmed when interconnectivity is ignored. Neutrality ignores injustices in a system and, therefore, works against the best practices of systems thinking.

Shared Governance Is Not Being Shared. Shared governance is a process to allow university stakeholders the ability to influence the decision-making process (McNaughtan et al., 2025). Typically, the most powerful voices are those of faculty and cabinet-level administrators, especially in making systems-level decisions. Research has shown student affairs practitioners are not invited decision makers (Squire et al., 2023) but rather are used as pawns to connect with minoritized communities (Howard-Hamilton & Williams, 1996). Applying critical sensemaking evokes the idea that without sharing power, inequities are perpetuated. This conclusion includes Research Questions 1, 3, and 4.

In a framework I suggest (i.e., Equitable Shared Governance), WOC leaders in student affairs assume shared decision-making power alongside cabinet-level administrators and faculty. Systemically, this approach would signify trust and agency, and give WOC the ability to influence decisions. It suggests a path forward for institutions to bring WOC leaders in student affairs into decision-making processes as true partners in the desire for more equitable institutions. The framework is embedded with a lens of intersectionality. This concept is depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Equitable Shared Governance



Note. Figure created by author using Napkin AI.

Many times, institutions via its cabinet-level leaders, do not purposefully exclude WOC, but the structure or complexity of the organization limits access. If these leaders are ignorant of this limitation, from a systems perspective, they are elusive to the idea that structure generates behavior (Stroh, 2015; Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.). The university leadership is a product of whiteness within these institutions; this framework provides a commitment from university leadership that builds trust. Scholarship has supported this shared approach. Davis et al. (2020) suggested distributed leadership, instilled confidence in staff and faculty, and a commitment to equity could be used as a three-pronged strategy to build a positive climate.

Critical sensemaking affirms the idea that lack of access and agency to shared governance occurred because imbalanced power structures were in place. In systems thinking, Stroh (2015) explained the concept of making an explicit choice, especially when short-term solutions (e.g., maintaining the status quo) are easier. This concept is significant because it emphasizes the need to invest in WOC for their individual growth and development, but also to allow the institution to be a catalyst for change.

Conclusion

Overall, the implications and conclusions address the research questions, thereby highlighting the need for change. The implications expanded on the findings, whereas the conclusions focused on three areas: the WOC in student affairs who manage the interplay, the interplay, and the institutions. The conclusions built off one another, showcasing interrelated outcomes and the need for them to work cohesively. Finally, these implications and conclusions were interweaved with critical sensemaking and systems thinking to understand broadly and in-depth the impact of this study. The next chapter includes recommendations and a final conclusion.

Chapter 7: Recommendations and Conclusion

Qualitative research culminates in developing an essence of an experience, essentially marking what descriptive studies specifically show in how individuals make meaning of a phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tisdell et al., 2025). Critical sensemaking also asks how something occurred and why it did, with a lens of power and privilege in a system (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Systems thinking in its broadest sense looks at how parts of a complex system work interconnectedly for a long-term solution (Stroh, 2015). Thus, as this dissertation research concludes, it is appropriate to revisit and intertwine all these concepts. This chapter is organized into four parts: a review of the findings, recommendations, a summary, and a final conclusion.

Review of Findings

There were four major findings, with each corresponding to a research question.

1. In the Groundwater: Whiteness is embedded into campus climate affecting the roles of women of color (WOC) and causing them to make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequities in institutions. In other words, it emphasizes structural racism's inequities in a university. This whiteness then causes WOC to adjust their roles to counterbalance those factors.
2. Sourcing the Tools: Three precursors (i.e., understanding how free speech policies work, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to support themselves) help prepare WOC for managing the interplay. This second finding reveals the importance of interweaving knowledge, skills, and support to help balance impartial policies with equity.
3. Buried Seeds: Though WOC leaders in student affairs are systemically undervalued and feel an internal conflict with the interplay, they, like buried seeds, develop resilience to push through barriers to navigate the interplay. This finding shows WOC manage the interplay through learning, reflection, and action.
4. Tilling the Soil: Institutional commitments that center equity, inclusion, and WOC voices enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay. This final finding shows, for institutions to ensure equity, they must systemically commit to supporting WOC's leadership alongside the development of students.

Recommendations

Recommendations draw from the conclusions and create action next steps and suggestions for future research (Bloomberg, 2023). I offer recommendations for practice, including for WOC, cabinet-level leaders, and those at a systems level. Additionally, I provide directions for future research.

Recommendations for Practice for WOC in Student Affairs

There are several recommendations for WOC leaders who manage the interplay of free speech and inclusion. One, WOC leaders should invest in relationships. This includes relationships that help support them, like mentors, supervisors, or other colleagues. They should advocate for themselves to be allowed to have a leadership coach or access to an executive consultant. Due to their experiences with marginalization, these relationships are part of the recovery network to mitigate the climate they are facing. In particular, it is important to find connections with other WOC who experience the campus similarly and can help support them (Boss & Bravo, 2020). This recommendation also includes building

relationships with students, faculty, staff, and cabinet-level administrators. Due to their identities and positionality, WOC have insights and experiences that make them particularly astute at sharing information, but much of that cannot be shared unless relationships and trust are created. Systemically, investing in other people creates causal loops for feedback, ideating, and success. Though this recommendation is applicable to many situations, WOC particularly rely on these support systems to manage the interplay.

Second, to manage the interplay, WOC need to strategically learn and use the resources at their disposal. Framing the interplay with concepts like intersectionality in decision making or working as a tempered radical while navigating administration tensions can allow WOC to help smooth its inherent friction. In doing so, they can help prevent experiences like burn-out and upheaval, as WOC are disproportionately tasked with addressing the interplay of free speech and inclusion (Anderson, 2021; Vigil et al., 2023). Strategies emerge through experience and reflection. Learning through affinity groups, (en)counterspaces, or one-on-one conversations with other WOC who have experienced and managed the interplay is key.

Recommendations of Practice for Cabinet-Level Leaders

There are several recommendations for cabinet-level leaders. First, cabinet-level leaders need to institutionalize support systems for WOC. In other words, to ensure institutions are committed to equity, WOC student affairs staff need equity. (En)counterspaces, as suggested by Boss and Bravo (2020), or other processing spaces (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2023) provide reflection and processing for groups based on identity. Additionally, the process includes having non-WOC staff consider their roles and experiences with institutional racism in a way that does not infringe on WOC (Boss & Bravo, 2020). By intentionally creating and supporting these spaces, cabinet-level leaders shape the institutional commitment to equity. Simultaneously, they should provide WOC access to networks, professional development, and coaching with institutionalized resources as additional mechanisms of support.

Next, cabinet-level leaders need to commit to reframing their institution's approach to the interplay. Using a lens of equitable practices not policies will decenter the policy aspect and reframe it around context. This approach does not negate the need for policies but intertwines WOC's ability to use nuance and context to acknowledge systemic oppression as part of the interplay. Specifics will be contextual to the university. This gives the experts on the ground some control over making decisions.

Policies need to be neutrally applied, but given the system is not neutral, practices need to be used to help recalibrate it. For example, an institution's time, place, manner (TPM) policies may indicate that amplified sound can only be played from 12–1 p.m. on weekdays. Neutral application of policies means if both Students for Justice in Palestine and the Taylor Swift Fan Club are amplifying sound outside these hours, both should be addressed through university policy. However, if disproportionate reporting of TPM violations for Students for Justice in Palestine exceeds the Taylor Swift Fan Club, a practice needs to account for this inequity. This is particularly true for groups like Students for Justice in Palestine in terms of the Palestinian exception to free speech (Ahmed & Key, 2024; Palestine Legal, 2015). Chemerinsky and Gillman (2026) contended approaches are not necessarily about whether the policies and rules exist, but rather when and how they should be enforced. Success arises from equitable application of practices and policies together.

Three, cabinet-level leaders need to give WOC leaders access to academic freedom. Allowing WOC positionality gives them an equitable voice and distinguishes them as the campus experts, with each institution delineating its own regulations around the process. Additionally, a privilege such as, or similar to, academic freedom for student affair professionals may damper psychological stressors such as gendered racial battle fatigue and burnout, which may exist due to fears related to exclusion from academic freedom. On a recent podcast, Chemerinsky stated:

Obligation of academic freedom is that as well-trained professionals, they have a right to express themselves in their teaching of advanced knowledge . . . and in the way that they are expressing their expertise to a broader audience as long as that expression reveals their fundamental competency as experts in that field, and is ethical in relationship to their professional responsibilities. (as cited by Deutchman, 2026, 40:60)

If this is true, then WOC in student affairs, many of whom have been given expertise in similar ways as faculty (e.g., those with a terminal degree) and just as importantly have the practitioner experience furthering that expertise, should have the same access.

Four, cabinet-level leaders need to pivot to a form of equitable shared governance. University leadership need to understand and facilitate this partnership. They need to be committed to not just having WOC at the table, but to understand and take into consideration their ideas, learning from them. Specifically, they need to understand who is doing the labor of interplay and their identities (Duran-Leftin & Duran, 2021), and ensure those staff are not isolated, in a move to prevent burnout or harassment. They need to learn from the knowledge, awareness, and skills WOC use to approach the interplay. This approach allows for duplication of WOC skills without disproportionate labor. This does not mean that once information is learned, WOC are irrelevant, but, rather, as systems thinking works, it is cyclical. In fact, cabinet-level leaders would bring WOC leaders to the decision-making table, listen, and give them agency to share authentic experiences and strategies. This approach not only supports WOC but also creates synergistic partnerships across the institution, with an ecosystem of collaboration.

Recommendations for Systemic Practices Within Institutions

There are a couple of recommendations for institutions. One, institutions need to establish equity at all levels by centering intersectionality. This means intersectionality should be considered in decision making, leaders should be trained to use intersectionality and self-reflect on their own intersectional lens, and intersectional voices should be centered. Pasque (2014) indicated the ability to do so erases campus climate stressors for WOC. Additionally, centering intersectionality includes instilling a systemic response to address harmful components of the interplay. Briscoe (2022) described the lack of response as further negating the experiences of staff of color. Essentially, this recommendation calls for leaders to internally understand how their organization is operating through their institution's mission and values. This recommendation inextricably is informed by critical sensemaking and systems thinking and relates to Cho et al.'s (2025) framing that institutions need to embed support for staff in four different ways: intersectional, relational, operational, and structural. For institutions, the commitment and accountability, alongside the roles of WOC, can move them toward equity. Institutional leaders need to understand the harms, recognize them, and counter them.

Two, institutions need to challenge the presumption of institutional neutrality. The disparities among WOC leaders' labor managing the interplay, thus, need to be acknowledged and understood as interconnected in a raced organization that was never neutral. Institutional leaders need to challenge agreements to neutrality given the histories of their own institutions and racial (among other identities) campus climate. They need to help create infrastructure and policy that works within an organization that is raced and cannot be neutral. This means understanding not everyone has access because of systemic oppression (P. H. Collins, 2015). WOC leaders in this study can be part of the answer, as they indicated they supported all students, even those with whom they disagreed, could understand that neutrality does not equate to equity, and upheld equitable practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research. Further research should also disaggregate data among ethnic groups within WOC, including expanding the data set among them. Research has shown WOC in student affairs had varied psychological experiences and labor experiences compared to one another (Maramba, 2011; Quaye et al., 2024; Sánchez et al., 2021); a larger, more disaggregated data set would be helpful to demonstrate those differences. Additionally, further research should include representation of ethnic groups not in this study and other intersectional identities, helping to distinguish how intersectionality materializes.

From a methodological lens, future research could include a case study design that reviews how cabinet-level leadership and WOC leaders in student affairs interact with one another as they manage the interplay. Furthermore, mixed-methods research could be conducted to use a survey design to frame decision making and approaches about the interplay with both qualitative and quantitative data.

Future research should also include a more nuanced look at leadership in student affairs and other positions, perhaps focusing on assistant or associate vice presidents or vice provosts (AVP) or assistant or associate vice chancellor (AVC) and senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) who were not included in this study to specifically understand how learning, risk, and strategy transpire and how that connects to ascension in the field. Another area where research could be expanded is to understand how WOC leaders at various institutional types experience the interplay, with particular attention to historically Black colleges and universities and nonhistorically white institutions, knowing WOC at those institutions may have very specific experiences. Hurtado et al. (2012) included institutional type in the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) as an element that shapes climate. This research would help clarify how whiteness affects those institutions in similar and different ways as those in this study. The study could also be expanded to understand how cross-institutional partnerships help or hinder WOC in managing the interplay.

Finally, it would be interesting to understand how these concepts apply to other WOC student affairs leaders who may not work with the interplay but are still committed to equity (e.g., those WOC who work in such areas as housing and residence life, career services, or orientation). Continued further research enhances scholarship on WOC leaders in student affairs, an understudied but highly influential group.

Summary

This descriptive qualitative study examined how WOC leaders in student affairs, who managed the interplay of free speech and inclusion, used their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. The interplay was defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside their own equity and inclusion values, given their positionality in the institution and their identities.

Findings showed WOC make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequalities attributed to structural racism's inequities. To prepare themselves, WOC interweave an underlying understanding of free speech policies, help prepare students, and build a community of support for themselves. WOC leaders in student affairs manage the interplay by ensuring they learned the skills, making sense of it, and then embodying nuanced practices to counterbalance the inequity, all as a form of resilience. A through-line focused on the support WOC needed, including other women. Institutions need to commit to institutional support of WOC and democratic engagement of its students.

Implications showed systemic barriers cause heightened values misalignment for the WOC who experience disproportionate harm in racialized and gendered working environments. These conditions generate both risk and resilience in WOC leaders in student affairs. Additionally, implications included that invisibilized aspects of free speech exist with the potential to target marginalized people and WOC create pathways for students to have tools to approach the interplay. However, WOC cannot use their role to influence the university's commitment to equity and inclusion on their own. Institutions need to systemically support WOC's leadership and student learning to commit to equity and inclusion.

Conclusions for WOC include (a) relationships as the cornerstone of their role managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion, (b) an affirmation of their camaraderie with other WOC, and (c) an understanding that their approach was valid from the outset. However, a lack of academic freedom was a stopgap in how they navigated the interplay. Implications for the interplay include a view that college campuses are a microcosm of greater society, free speech policies are raced and do not allow for an equitable voice, and, finally, the interplay is gendered and racialized labor, and therefore, is undervalued in the workplace. Finally, conclusions for institutions show the embeddedness of structural racism that affects the interplay, neutrality does not exist in nonneutral institutions, and, finally, without sharing power among administrators, faculty, and staff (i.e., WOC leaders in student affairs), inequities are perpetuated.

Conclusion

This research attempted to understand how the roles of WOC leaders in student affairs who are managing the interplay can influence institutional commitments to equity and inclusion. It showed WOC are agentic in addressing the interplay if they have access to education, support systems, time for reflection, and room for interpretation. However, they need institutions to systemically commit to WOC leadership and student learning. This research addressed a gap in understanding the roles of WOC in student affairs leaders, especially because they have been disproportionately represented in administrative leadership positions. Their double marginalization not only harms but also empowers them, creating a resiliency with relationships at the core. When they do this, not only do they succeed, but so do students, other staff, cabinet-level leaders, and the institution by establishing equitable infrastructure at

all levels. Jordan (2005) described this investment in *Calling All Silent Majorities* with the following words:

HEY

C'MON

COME OUT

WHEREVER YOU ARE

WE NEED TO HAVE THIS MEETING

AT THIS TREE

AIN' EVEN BEEN

PLANTED

YET

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Appendix A: Participant Outreach Email

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I have some exciting news to share. I am recruiting potential participants for my dissertation research and need (and kindly request) your help. My proposed dissertation examines whether women leaders of color in student affairs who self-identify as being committed to equitable practices but also enact free speech policies, can use their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion.

Participation would entail completing a demographic form after which eligible participants will be invited to an online 60-minute interview (held via video conferencing). Interested participants should complete the consent and demographic form (bit.ly/WOCinSA) hosted at University of California, Berkeley Qualtrics.

Criteria includes: (a) must be employed in a division of student affairs (or similar department) at an accredited 4-year university in the United States, (b) identify with the term woman of color, (c) have experience managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion, (d) self-identify as having a commitment to equitable practices, and (e) serve as a director-level mid-manager, a senior level manager, or an AVP/AVC, with at least 10 years of full time experience.

The demographic form should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and includes the informed consent form. This would need to be signed prior to filing out the demographic form. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. All participants who complete the online interview will be eligible for a \$15 e-gift card.

If you know of individuals who would be interested in participating or meet the criteria in this study, please forward this message to them or share my [LinkedIn post](#).

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me via email at xxxxxx@berkeley.edu. If you have additional questions or concerns, you can contact my faculty advisor Dr. Tolani Britton xxxxxx@berkeley.edu. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Berkeley (IRB#2025-01-18170).

Thank you for your consideration,

Ankita Rakhe

Doctoral Candidate, Leaders for Equity and Democracy (LEAD)

University of California, Berkeley

Appendix B: Social Media (LinkedIn) Post

Exciting news: I am embarking on my dissertation research and would love any assistance to help me find a diverse group of participants. My proposed dissertation examines whether women leaders of color in student affairs who self-identify as being committed to equitable practices but also enact free speech policies, can use their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion (yes, very [#timely](#)).

Scan the QR code on the flier, go to bit.ly/WOCinSA or message me to learn more.

[#studentaffairs](#) [#womenofcolor](#) [#highered](#) [#equity](#) [#inclusion](#)

Research Participants Requested

The Interplay of Free Speech and Inclusion: The Roles of Student Affairs Women Leaders of Color and Institutional Influence

Research Objective:
Examine whether women leaders of color who self-identify as being committed to equitable practices but also enact free speech policies can use their role to influence their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion

Eligibility:

- Work in Student Affairs at a 4-year institution in the U.S.
- Identify as a woman of color
- Experience managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion
- Hold a commitment to equity
- Serve as a director-level mid-manager, a senior manager, or an AVP/AVC, with at least 10 years of full time experience

Process:

- Fill out a demographic form
- Eligible participants may be invited to participate in a 60 minute interview on Zoom
- Interviewees receive a \$15 gift card

bit.ly/WOCinSA

Ankita Rakhe
Doctoral Candidate
University of California,
Berkeley

Dr. Tolani Britton
Faculty Advisor
University of California,
Berkeley

IRB#2025-01-18170

Appendix C: Demographic Information Form

Instructions

Please answer the questions below to help me understand more details about you and your experiences. I will use this information to determine participation in the online interview.

1. How do you identify (e.g., what social identities do you hold)? You may list or use a narrative form to describe your identities.
2. Do you identify with the phrase woman of color? This does not need to be your primary racial identity. Feel free to simply answer yes or no, or expand your answer.
3. What institution do you work at?
4. What is your job title?
5. Does your work include any connection to the interplay of free speech and inclusion? Interplay is defined as enacting an institution's free speech policies alongside an individual's own equity and inclusion values. (Y/N)
6. Do you consider yourself to be committed to equitable practices? (Y/N)
7. How many years of experience do you have working in the field of Student Affairs?
8. Which category best defines your current professional level? (director-level mid manager, senior level staff, or AVP/AVC)
9. If you are selected to do an online interview, please list the pseudonym you would like to use for yourself and the pseudonym you would like to use for your institution.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Welcome! My name is Ankita Rakhe and I am a University of California, Berkeley doctoral candidate. Thank you for consenting to be a part of this interview today. The title of my research is *The Interplay of Free Speech & Inclusion: Student Affairs Women Leaders of Color and Institutional Influence*

A couple of reminders that I wanted to share:

- To facilitate my note taking, I would like to record our conversations today. For your information, only my PI and I will be privy to the recording. Please turn off the video by clicking “stop video” once we start the interview.
- I will be using the pseudonym that you designated in the demographic form. Feel free to rename yourself on Zoom with that name or however you prefer to be called during the interview.
- I will also share my findings from this interview with you to ensure that I have captured your experience, words, and ideas correctly. Beyond that, I plan to hold all information as confidential as possible.
- Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, ask for the recording to be stopped, or skip questions.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- I also understand that an interview may bring up triggering, sensitive or emotionally charged experiences given the topic and if needed, I can provide you with a list of mental health resources.
- Please be careful not to include any information in your responses that could identify other individuals.
- This interview should last no longer than 60 minutes. During this time, I have 11 questions that I would like to cover.
- You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a woman of color leader who works in the field of Student Affairs and has had experiences working with interplay of free speech and inclusion. I am trying to understand whether women leaders of color in student affairs who self-identify as being committed to equitable practices but also enact free speech policies, can use their role to influence their institution’s commitment to equity and inclusion.
- I am going to use the phrase “interplay of free speech and inclusion” or “interplay” for short several times. By that I mean enacting an institution’s free speech policies alongside an individual’s own equity and inclusion values. Specific examples include but not limited to, microaggressions, use of slurs, xenophobic events planned by student organizations, or speakers that espouse hate. I ask that you specifically think of them in the context of on campus incidents that affect students.
- Feel free to ask me to repeat questions. I will also paste them into the chat.

Do you have any questions about the consent before we begin?

If it is okay with you, I’m going to start recording.

(ACTION: Interviewer should ensure participants give verbal consent before recording.)

1. Start Otter AI
2. Start Zoom recording. Stop video.

Interview Questions

Section 1: Background

1. In your demographic form, you indicated that you identified as a woman of color. What does being a woman of color mean to you?

Section 2: Navigating the Interplay of Free Speech and Inclusion

2. Free speech policies are core to most universities. In your experience, can you describe how the policies impact inclusive practices?
3. How did you learn about managing this interplay and how do you process it, for your own understanding?
 - a. Have other WOC provided mentorship that helped you navigate these challenges? If so, how has this shaped your approach?
4. I would like to read a statement and then ask for your thoughts.

The positionality of your role in the institution may seem like a contradiction given

- *your identities and*
- *as someone who is committed to equitable practices but needs to respond in a certain way (or feel the need to respond) in regard to this interplay.*

How do you see this dynamic playing out in your role? Do you find it challenging, and if so, in what ways?"

Section 3: Campus Climate and the Interplay

Campus climate includes how students, faculty members, and staff understand and navigate the institution's perceptions, attitudes, and expectations, considering how the environments, policies, and services affect them and each other (Hurtado, 1992)

5. How does the campus climate at your institution affect your approach to this interplay?
6. Do you think your institution's climate counters its own inclusion practices? Why or why not and how do you navigate working within it?
7. Do you feel like your division or department provides support for women leaders of color who manage this interplay in ways that your institution does not? Why or why not?

Section 4: Influencing Institutions

8. Can you share any success stories where this interplay was effectively balanced in a university setting?
9. What would university leadership need to know about you as a woman leader of color, and your approach and experiences to managing this interplay that could create more equitable practices for your institution?

10. What recommendations would you have for university leaders to redesign free speech policies to encumber inclusion without infringing on free speech?

Section 5: Closing:

11. Would you like to add anything else to describe your experiences personally, for students, or the institution about managing the interplay of free speech and inclusion?

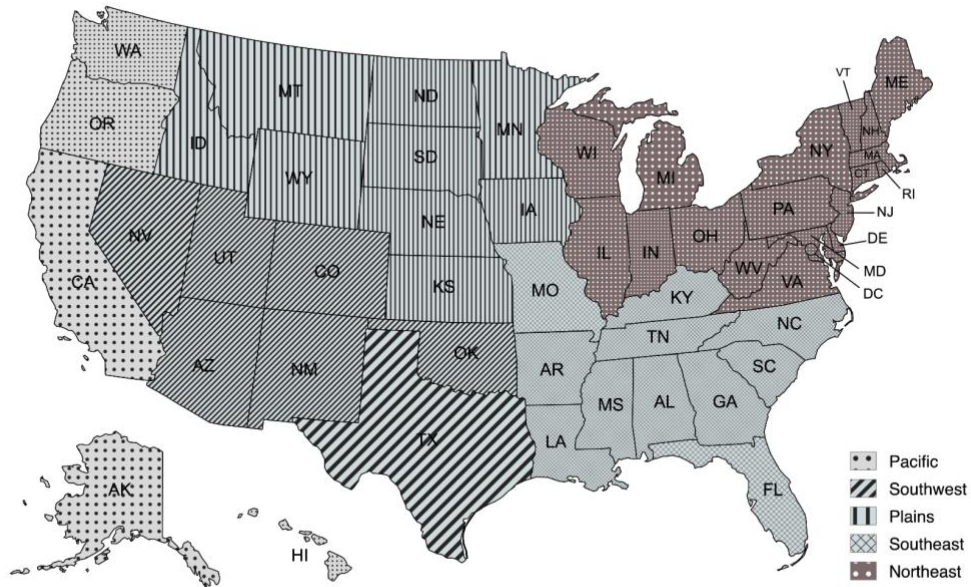
Thank you for your participation.

Would you be willing to suggest any other people who might be interested in the study?

A couple of housekeeping tidbits:

- *I will delete the calendar invite.*
- *I will clean up this transcript and send it to you for your review.*
- *For the gift card, I do a weekly update to the system that processes cards. You should get an email with a link to a choice of a plethora of cards.*

Appendix E: Map of Regions



Note. Map created by author with Mapchart.net.

Appendix F: Research Questions, Coding, Finding, and Subfindings

Table F1

Research Question 1: Coding, Finding, and Subfindings

Finding	Subfinding	Coding categories
Finding 1: In the Groundwater: whiteness is embedded into campus climate causing WOC to make dynamic shifts in their roles to adjust for the inequalities	Subfinding 1.1: Factors affecting the interplay <i>The campus climate factors that most influence how the institutional interplay is handled</i>	Institutional type State politics and federal actions Institutional leaders Outside influencers (e.g., alumni, donors) Complexity of the organization Laws and policies Institutional history Institutional neutrality Lack of trust of, lack of agency Lack of academic freedom for WOC Limited affinity spaces or counterspaces Psychological stressors (emotional labor, burnout, emotional safety, gendered racial battle fatigue, not being listened to)
	Subfinding 1.2: Experiencing challenging environments <i>The lived experiences that make it difficult for WOC to address the interplay</i>	Draw from identities Freedom dreaming Masquerade a role Advocacy Grow Anxious More Cautious Empowerment
	Subfinding 1.3: Responding to conditions <i>The ways WOC respond to the conditions they experience</i>	

Table F2

Research Question 2: Coding, Finding, and Subfindings

Finding	Subfinding	Coding categories
Finding 2: Sourcing the Tools: Three tools: understanding how free speech works, knowing strategies to support students, and having resources to	Subfinding 2.1: Institutional nuances of free speech policies <i>The hidden realities of free speech policies</i>	Not neutrally applied Recognition of power dynamics Target and harm marginalized students Staff on the ground not consulted Groups in power have positionality Restrictive Unclear
	Subfinding 2.2: Approaches to support students	Teach strategies Share resources

Finding	Subfinding	Coding categories
support themselves are required to prepare WOC for managing the interplay.	<i>The multiple ways WOC support students engaging in free speech</i>	Create good relationships Understand developmental nature of protest
	Subfinding 2.3: Robust community of support <i>The ways that WOC finding healing, support, and camaraderie</i>	Peers/Colleagues Supervisors Mentors Mentees Affinity Spaces Personal support/growth

Table F3*Research Question 3: Coding, Finding, and Subfindings*

Finding	Subfinding	Coding categories
Finding 3: Buried Seeds: Though WOC leaders in student affairs are systemically undervalued, they, like buried seeds, develop resilience to push through barriers to embody the interplay.	Subfinding 3.1: Learning the how-to <i>The sources where WOC learned how to manage the interplay of free speech and inclusion</i>	Experience Learning from mistakes Their own activism Coaching students Professional development From non-WOC From other WOC Through commitments to DEI By modeling it for others
	Subfinding 3.2: Reconciling role and identities <i>The challenges that exist in managing the interplay as WOC; critical sensemaking in action</i>	Internal conflict/juxtaposition Isolation Complexity Challenge Student Identity and Their Own Compartmentalizing Reluctant acceptance
	Subfinding 3.3: Embodiment of the interplay <i>The ways that WOC operationalize the interplay to ensure they are committed to equitable practices</i>	Empathetic Relational Values-oriented Orienting toward tempered radicalism Their own background and identities Code switching Resilience Strategic Listening Translators Support of all students De-escalation

Table F4*Research Question 4: Coding, Finding, and Subfindings*

Finding	Subfinding	Coding categories
Finding 4, Tilling the Soil: Institutions need to make commitments that center equity, inclusion and WOC voices to enhance the role WOC have in managing the interplay	Subfinding 4.1: Enactment of equitable interplay <i>The systemic commitments for universities to uphold to move toward equity.</i> Subfinding 4.2: Student Outcomes <i>The student outcomes that result from full commitment in moving toward equity</i>	Inclusive of WOC leader voices and intersectionality Using systems thinking strategies (e.g., slow thinking) Upholding a “practices (not policies)” standard Support of WOC well-being Equitable Inclusion of student voice Shared governance Global citizens Education (e.g., dialogue, critical thinking) Making a difference