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Change in the Crosshairs:
How DEI Communities of Practice Shape Equity-Focused Leadership Efforts Amid Backlash
(Berkeley Edition)

by
Mohammed Soriano-Bilal

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Jabari Mahiri, Co-Chair
Professor Özge Hacifazlıoğlu, Co-Chair
Professor José Eos Trinidad

Spring 2026

Change in the Crosshairs:

How DEI Communities of Practice Shape Equity-Focused Leadership Efforts Amid Backlash

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By

Mohammed Soriano-Bilal

Abstract

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Mohammed Soriano-Bilal

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Jabari Mahiri, Co-Chair

Professor Özge Hacifazlıoğlu, Co-Chair

Since 2020, researchers have documented a concerted sociopolitical effort to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in higher education. These attacks have led to state legislatures dismantling DEI programs and infrastructure at several universities. In this case study of an intraorganizational DEI-centered Community of Practice (DCoP) at a private university in California, I investigated how the participation of eight of its senior higher education leaders informed and influenced their perspectives and practices in ways that advanced equity-focused organizational change efforts. I drew data from semistructured interviews of the eight participants along with document analysis of texts they generated or that were on the university websites. Expanding on current higher education literature on DEI, communities of practice (CoPs), and organizational change management (OCM), I found that senior higher education leaders use DCoPs for professional information sharing, guidance, support, and as a strategic lever for equity-focused organizational change. Unaccounted for in the current literature, I found that anti-DEI backlash is facilitating a movement of highly skilled leaders, not “DEI hires”, from targeted DEI roles to ubiquitous roles like finance and operations.

Keywords: diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, higher education, organizational change, sociopolitical backlash, senior leadership, systems leadership

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Change in the Crosshairs: How DEI Communities of Practice Shape Equity-Focused Leadership Efforts Amid Backlash

Chapter 1: Introduction

As of February 2026, 154 state bills have targeted DEI funding, offices, programs, and staff in United States higher education institutions (Cutler et al., 2026; Hill et al., 2024; Reilly, 2024). From nomenclature to operations to the removal of cultural centers and DEI offices, there have been significant “changes at 445 campuses in 48 states and the District of Columbia” (Cutler et al., 2026, para. 1). The attacks against DEI accelerated in 2020 after unprecedented calls for social justice and equity due to George Floyd’s murder and the proceeding global Black Lives Matter protests. As universities, corporations, nonprofits, and state governments tried to ameliorate the sociopolitical unrest (and loss of revenue) by addressing the judicial, racial, medical, and socioeconomic disparities that Black and Brown communities faced, DEI practitioners were rapidly mobilized, hired, and promoted to educate, lead, and advise organizations on the best path forward. On January 21, 2025, the Trump administration’s Executive Order 14173, *Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity* (Wales, 2025), designed to dismantle DEI, affirmative action, and equal opportunity programs and practices in the “Federal Government, major corporations, financial institutions, the medical industry, large commercial airlines, law enforcement agencies, and institutions of higher education” (Wales, 2025, Section 1), sent higher education leaders tasked with implementing equity-focused organizational change scrambling to align inclusive organizational values with federal mandates.

With the legislative backlash against DEI (Greene, n.d.; Hill et al., 2024; Reilly, 2024; Wales, 2025b), it becomes important to apprehend how sociopolitical pressure shapes organizational change efforts of senior leaders in higher education. In this study I investigated how senior higher education leaders participating in DEI-centered communities of practice (DCoPs) utilize them as levers for navigating equity-focused organizational change during times of sociopolitical tumult. Understanding how community factors, such as DCoPs, contribute to senior higher education leaders’ implementation of equity-focused change initiatives is essential for theoretical and practical reasons. First, this knowledge can help researchers understand how senior leaders approach equity-focused organizational change in higher education amid backlash. Second, this research may inform senior higher education leaders as they leverage DCoPs to navigate the current sociopolitical quagmire of equity-focused organizational change. Third, this research provides insight into the effect of DCoP participation on senior higher education leaders. Last, this investigation may offer a glimpse into the future state of equity work in higher education. The primary research question is the following:

How does senior higher education leaders’ participation in DCoPs inform and influence their perspectives and practices in ways that advance equity-focused organizational change?

In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, I explore the literature on DEI, CoPs, DCoPs, and organizational change management in higher education. Chapter 3 focuses on the Methodology, elucidating the researcher’s decisions on the setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis, while sharing the researcher’s positionality and its connection to the study. Chapter 4 details the study’s Findings, highlighting insights from the data. Finally, in Chapter 5, the Discussion and Conclusion, I discuss how the findings converge and diverge from the literature,

concluding with the study's limitations, implications, and future directions for subsequent research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Over the last decade, numerous researchers have claimed that DEI, in its current state, does not yield significant changes in behavior, organizations, and systems (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023; Zheng, 2022). Because of this research and other sociocultural phenomena (Greene, n.d.), the DEI field is experiencing sociopolitical pressure to discontinue what researchers have argued to be ineffective (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) and “divisive” practices (Greene, n.d.; Hill et al., 2024, p. 390; Reilly, 2024). That said, equally compelling research highlights DEI’s tangible benefits, including social cohesion (Harper, 2025), marked innovation (Page, 2017), improved student outcomes (Harper, 2025), increased gender diversity and advancement of non-male genders (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020), and increased bottom line for companies embracing DEI. CoPs are informal groups of people who convene regularly to share and enhance their knowledge. Since the early 1990s, CoPs have shown promise in improving organizational effectiveness (King et al., 2023; Malone, 2019; Valentine & Hinds, 2022; Webber & Dunbar, 2019; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022). DCoPs are communities of practice that aim to enhance the skills and capacity of DEI practitioners by building community through the sharing of knowledge and industry-specific resources. DCoP members share knowledge multilaterally, creating a network of equity-minded practitioners who support one another’s professional growth. Organizational change management (OCM) is the process of transitioning people, places, and practices, along with their associated and complex interactions, from one state to another over time and space (Burnes, 2019). In other words, DEI work is equity-focused OCM work (Zheng, 2022) aimed at transforming an inequitable system into an equitable and sustainable one. In this literature review I examine how participation in DCoPs inform and influence the practice of senior higher education leaders tasked with enacting equity-focused organizational change management. Lave and Wenger (1991) defined the key consideration for these leaders’ “participation” as “a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the ‘culture of practice’” (p. 95).

Higher education DEI work is under immense sociopolitical pressure to cessate (Hill et al., 2024; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Pollack et al., 2025; Stokas, 2023), and “DEI at present does not create the impact it promises” (Zheng, 2022, p. 32). In this study, I investigated senior higher education leaders participating in DCoPs, where members regularly convene to share tacit knowledge (Wenger-Trayner, 2015), as a potential medium for leveraging collective intelligence (Malone, 2019) and navigating challenges toward improving organizational change efforts. To that end, this literature review attempts to answer the following questions:

- What does the history and evolution of DEI and CoPs tell us about the effectiveness of DCoPs?
- How do DCoPs influence and inform senior higher education leaders tasked with implementing equity-focused organizational change?

Theoretical Framework

For this literature review, I am combining Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as a theoretical lens and Liberatory Design as “an approach to addressing equity challenges and change efforts in complex systems” (National Equity Project, n.d.). SCT involves investigating human behavior in personal, social, and environmental interactions (Wood & Bandura, 1989), framing how humans respond to personal (e.g., social identity) and environmental (e.g., organizational change) stimuli, providing a critical lens for this exploration, while Liberatory Design, with its origins in feminist liberatory practice (Hooks, 1991; Lorde, 2000), systems theory (Meadows, 2009), and design thinking (National Equity Project, n.d.), provides dialogic contrast and triangularity as well as a

dialogic tool for comparing and contrasting the design and implementation of equity-focused organizational change efforts in the literature.

The review starts with the problem statement and proceeds with the literature's domains and subdomains. In the first domain I examine the DEI field's history and current state, including the three themes of (a) DEI does not work, (b) DEI does work if done right, and (c) DEI works as intended, which form a continuum in the literature from least efficacious to most efficacious (i.e., reinforcing harmful systems), based on researcher-assigned parameters on what does and does not constitute DEI work. In the second domain I focus on CoPs, groups of people in the same profession who work together to get better at what they do (Lave & Wenger, 1991), including the themes of capacity building, knowledge sharing (Malone, 2019; Wenger, 1998), innovation (King et al., 2023), and the impact of CoPs on organizational processes. I then coalesce these two domains to provide a better understanding of DCoPs. In the third and last domain, I delve into OCM, with themes including higher education's structural resistance to change and the use of systems thinking and improvement science by leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Because DEI is experiencing sociopolitical pressure to discontinue what some researchers have argued are ineffective (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) and “divisive” practices (Greene, n.d.; Hill et al., 2024, p. 390; Reilly, 2024), it is critical to understand whether DEI is simply “happy talk” (Gibbs et al., 2023, p. 42; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023) or has the potential to transform organizations and systems (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020; Gibbs et al., 2023; King, et al., 2023).

Historical Background

The DEI field dates back to the 1960s, when the practice of diversity emerged as an extension of civil rights efforts and a salve for right-wing sociopolitical resistance to new federal equal rights laws—Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967; Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII); Equal Pay Act of 1963—and affirmative action programs (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023; Zheng, 2022). Zheng (2022) located the origins of DEI education with Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist who developed the T-group, or training group, as an organizational change management tool in response to a potential increase in workforce diversity (p. 65). Stokas (2023) explored the “epistemology of difference, or what I believe we now describe as ‘diversity’ . . . as sprung from the Wunderkammern, or curiosity cabinets, of Europe, a practice of collecting and organizing difference which contributed to the development of academic disciplines (Menakem, 2017) within university spaces and through the behaviors of accumulation, colorblindness, partitioning, and dispossession” (p. 25). Oliha-Donaldson (2020) credited the Truman administration's 1947 Commission on Higher Education, with its identification of racial discrimination (against African American students), religious discrimination (against Jewish students), and “antifeminism” (against women students; p.17), as “the beginnings of a large-scale awakening to the idea of social justice in higher education (Gilbert & Heller, 2010)” (16).

Regardless of studying DEI's functional aspect (e.g., education, business, law), there is a consensus in the literature that DEI's current manifestation is directly linked to higher education and the hallmark 1978 affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, p. 19; Stokas, 2023, p. 21; Zheng, 2022, p. 71), in which Allan Bakke, a 35-year-old White man, “claimed that he met the school's admission criteria and was denied admission, twice, because of his race. At the time, the university reserved 16 percent of the seats in its incoming class for minority applicants under its affirmative action program” (Stokas, 2023,

p. 99). “This landmark case operationally and discursively separated ‘diversity’ as an organizational construct from considerations of social justice and equity in higher education (Harris, 2018)” (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, p. 20).

Because the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion have evolved separately in the Americas, with their conceptual meanings and applications shifting over time, there are no universally applied definitions that all organizations or equity-focused leaders use to elucidate these concepts (Zheng, 2022, pp. 35–36). To complicate matters more, the modern DEI field and its associated meanings and applications evolved in four overlapping waves, in response to societal factors and in an attempt to capture sociopsychological and organizational goals. Unfortunately, this has led to a framing of DEI that holds different meanings to different constituents—and where it is everything and nothing simultaneously. Oliha-Donaldson (2020) explained it as follows:

Diversity has become a shifting signifier that can stand for whatever an organization needs; if it is inclusion of as much difference as possible, as evidence of a “diverse campus,” it can be used to sanction representation. If it is needed for image repair after a failed diversity moment, it can be used discursively to reaffirm the identity of the institution as a place where diversity is “valued” and “where all are welcome” (Ahmed, 2012). p. 26)

This has led to imprecision in defining DEI as a practice and confusion in its application and purpose. This confusion has led many to view DEI work as feel-good interpersonal work, an enhancement to other operational areas, not as systems change work (Gibbs et al., 2023; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020).

Table 1 chronicles the evolution DEI work in the U.S.:

Table 1

Evolution of DEI Work in the United States (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, pp. 16-22)

Characteristics	Focus	Key Milestones
Wave 1: Civil Rights & Affirmative Action (1964–1986)	Civil Rights Movement, government reform, self-determination, anti-discrimination	Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), Affirmative Action policies (1970s), Civil Rights Restoration Act (1986)
Wave 2: Multiculturalism (1988–2004)	"Calming storms," retreat from affirmative action, valuing differences, fostering understanding	"Multiculturalism" gains traction (1988), Multicultural education initiatives (1990s), U.S. Census includes multiple races (1997), Multicultural movement faces criticism (2004)
Wave 3: Diversity (1996–2014)	Playing it safe" with diversity initiatives	"Diversity" becomes mainstream (1996), Diversity initiatives focus on compliance (2000s), "Diversity" used in corporate branding (2010), Social media amplifies calls for change (2014)

Characteristics	Focus	Key Milestones
Wave 4: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) (2005–2025)	Emergence of DEI as a formal construct	"Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" used more frequently (2005), Black Lives Matter movement (2015), COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements (2020), DEI recognized as critical component (2024)
Wave Next: Future State (2023 and beyond) *amended by Soriano-Bilal (2026)	Transition through sociopolitical backlash toward continuous improvement and systemic transformation	Challenges from sociopolitical backlash, job loss, communal self-examination, growth, and improvement

Contemporary DEI

The DEI field evolved to address the lack of equity-focused efforts in operational areas such as HR, learning and development, product, and strategy (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, p. 26). Additionally, since George Floyd's murder in 2020, the DEI field has grown rapidly and organically, leading to a lack of standardization (Wang et al., 2023). To avoid confusion, for this literature review, I will use organizational psychologists Hebl and King's (2024) definitions:

Diversity is defined as the extent to which a group of people includes members that differ in socially meaningful ways from each other at work.

Inclusion is defined as the process of ensuring that people from different backgrounds are invited to and appreciated in the workplace.

Equity is defined as the existence of fair and just practices within organizations so that all members can thrive (pp. 12–13).

The literature on DEI locates several themes: (a) DEI does not work, (b) DEI does work if done right, and (c) DEI is working as intended. In the seminal *Harvard Business Review* article, "Why Diversity Programs Fail?", Dobbin and Kalev (2016) stated that "hundreds of studies dating back to the 1930s suggest that antibias training does not reduce bias, alter behavior or change the workplace" (p. 48), and that an "organization will become less diverse, not more, if you require managers to go to diversity training, try to regulate their hiring and promotion decisions, and put in a legalistic grievance system" (p. 22). Their research showed that interventions such as mandatory DEI training, job tests, and grievance systems led to a reduction in the representation of women and Black, Asian, and Hispanic employees at 829 U.S. companies (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Zheng (2022) postulated that DEI programs do not work due to a lack of practitioner knowledge and strategic focus on outcomes. Stokas (2023) asserted that "more often than not, in my experience, inclusion work operates at the level of offering workshops and affinity groups, not at the level of changing policy, practices, or structures that have upheld an oppressive environment" (p. 46). Narrowing in on colleges and universities, Leon (2014) added that "despite widespread efforts in higher education, only a few campuses have achieved their diversity goals, and many continue to struggle with linking diversity to educational quality (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Chun & Evans, 2008)" (p. 1).

While provocative, the DEI-does-not-work argument in the literature usually focuses on DEI training, the implicit bias of managers, or the lack of systems change, and it often comes with the caveat that a shift in approach may produce positive results. That is, DEI *can* work if done right. In many ways, the DEI-does-not-work argument sells articles, and what does work.

For example, in the same article, “Why Diversity Programs Fail?”, Dobbin and Kalev (2016) suggested coupling “diversity training with the right complementary measures” (p. 52) such as mentorship; voluntary buy-in; manager inclusion in college diversity recruitment efforts; and increased intergroup, intraorganizational contact through cross-training as research-backed methods for catalyzing managers’ participation in DEI programs (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Practices aligned with traditional DEI work when viewed through the lense of social identity and power (e.g. the mentorship of women by a senior male leader, the inclusion of queer managers in college recruitment; etc.). Zheng (2022) outlined a step-by-step plan for DEI practitioners to improve organizational outcomes around DEI. To et al. (2023) also suggested that “managers can perceive inequity in society and other organizations but not in their own workplace” and that “asking managers to deliberately process examples of inequity specifically within their own workplace can help reduce motivated blindness and this ‘not here’ bias” associated with their “resistance to diversity initiatives” (p. 34). When examining the effectiveness of leadership during the current anti-DEI backlash, Pollack et al. (2025) added that “leaders need to ‘talk the walk,’ which means clearly and consistently articulating what their organization is doing—and why—with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion to drive shared understanding and collective buy-in.” Grim et al. (2025) concluded that effective DEI leadership required moving beyond compliance and utilizing professional networks, such as DCoPs, to find support and share promising strategies for navigating the sociopolitical attacks. Gibbs et al. (2023) used the term *transformative DEI*, which emerges “from growing discussions of ‘non-performative’ diversity (Ahmed, 2012) and shifts from diversity to ‘equity regimes’ (Thomas, 2020)” (p. 2), to highlight a collective process they used to establish and institutionalize a critical DEI minor at Michigan State University. Ahmed (2012) echoed this institutionally transformative perspective that “diversity work does not simply generate knowledge about institutions (in which the institution becomes a thematic); it generates knowledge of institutions in the process of attempting to transform them” (p. 173).

Perhaps the DEI-does-not work definition fails to adequately define and delineate the ubiquitous and amorphous nature of equity-focused work. For instance, cross-training programs may not be perceived as DEI programs because “these programs aren’t usually branded as diversity efforts” (Dobbin & Kalev, p. 16). Accordingly, any organizational effort, from finance to the implementation of new AI standards, may be approached through a DEI lens.

Last, scholars such as Stokas (2023) and Oliha-Donaldson (2020) have contended that DEI is doing precisely what it was designed to do—obfuscating the need for substantive change, social justice, and reparative actions. Oliha-Donaldson (2020) observed that DEI neglects equity and inclusion, morphing as needed, shifting meaning depending on the “organizational members” (p. 25), allowing DEI to be everything and nothing at the same time. Her research demonstrated that the definition of diversity includes the highlighting of sociocultural identities, the histories of sociocultural and institutional oppression, and “the organizational impact of differential levels of privilege, power, and opportunity” (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, p. 25). Stokas (2023) added to the does-DEI-work debate by asking two systems-focused questions: “Perhaps diversity is working exactly as it should? Perhaps it is doing what the epistemology of difference that undergirds it intends it to do?” (p. 35).

The literature on DEI is more varied and widespread than any other domain in this review. The query *diversity OR equity OR inclusion and DEI* when searching peer-reviewed research journals produces over 2.2 million results. Much of the literature on DEI in business, medicine, and higher education focuses on its effectiveness, highlighting what does not work,

what does work, and what works as intended to maintain the system. The DEI-does-not-work camp asserts that DEI interventions and initiatives are ineffective (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Zheng, 2022), while, in the same papers, providing concrete examples of DEI interventions and initiatives that are effective (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Zheng, 2022). Scholars who contend that DEI does work point to its amorphous and transformative nature as a flexible and self-reflective tool for investigating and catalyzing organizational change, while the DEI-works-as-intended camp calls attention to these same characteristics—diversity as everything and nothing at the same time—as a tricky organizational lever for upholding inequitable systems (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas; 2023). The tremendous amount of literature on DEI is in response to its rapid growth and change, in and of itself problematic to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of whether DEI is effective or not. If substantive, transformational DEI change is incremental, innovative, and sensitive to the ebbs and flows of sociopolitical events such as George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Presidential Executive Order 14173 (The White House, 2025b), how might equity-focused senior higher education leaders design resilient organizational change initiatives that produce less “happy talk” (Gibbs et al., 2023, p. 42) and more equitable outcomes? How might other evidence-based practices that improve organizational processes, such as CoPs, help senior higher education leaders?

DEI Leadership During Backlash. As the current backlash against DEI increases, questions around does DEI work, does DEI not work, or does DEI work as intended are being replaced by questions such as is DEI going to survive the federal attack; how do organizations and leaders who care about DEI navigate the attack; and, if DEI ends, what’s next? In current literature, researchers have explored the strategies and tactics DEI leaders or senior higher education leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change use to make sense of and navigate the sociopolitical attacks. These studies’ findings are compelling. Weissman (2025) found that higher education institutions are scrubbing DEI language and closing cultural centers to maintain federal funding and withstand the “double attack” (p. 6) of state laws and federal policy. She contended that DEI has entered a “post-mortem” (p. 13) state, aiming to account for past mistakes by presenting evidence-based arguments to the public for the necessity of moving equity-based work forward. Mackenzie et al. (2024) argued that DEI is doing what all movements do when under attack—go behind closed doors, to wait, plan, and prepare for the next opportunity to reassert itself. This quote perfectly encapsulates equity workers’ current sentiment: “The long view of literacies for leadership and inclusion is that even when battles are lost, they can constitute blows to the body politic that eventually weaken resistance and pave the way for productive change” (Mahiri, 2021, p. 56).

Green (2025) examined a faculty-led push to shift nomenclature and practice from DEI to pluralism in an effort to ward off federal lawsuits and refocus higher education institutions on dialogue and civics programs. Grim et al. (2025) conducted a “qualitative study of 40 Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs)” (p. 5) across health care organizations, businesses, municipalities, and higher education institutions to examine “organizational responses to anti-DEI action” (p. 5), chronicling how they have led to severe personal consequences, including isolation, job insecurity, and significant declines in mental and physical health. Grim et al. (2025) found that CDOs enacted “three distinct organizational responses” (p. 5): Strategic Inaction, waiting for sociopolitical shifts; Proaction, acting early to hedge disruption; and Reaction, complying with legal mandates. They concluded that effective DEI leadership required moving beyond compliance and utilizing professional networks, such as DCoPs, to find support and share promising strategies for navigating the sociopolitical attacks. Harper (2025) turned to five

decades of empirical research that consistently evidenced DEI initiatives improve critical thinking and prejudice reduction while decreasing institutional susceptibility to hate crimes and violence. He contended that the sociopolitical argument that DEI does not work is based on misinformation and unsubstantiated ideological claims, lacking rigorous evidence, and that the burden of proof must be placed on DEI opponents to provide empirical evidence for their claims of harm. In a separate study, Schachle-Gordon et al. (2025) found a significant increase in Black, Latinx, and Native American student groups as colleges and universities shutter DEI offices and cultural centers. The authors provided evidence “that students are continuing to organize diverse spaces despite (or even because of) recent anti-DEI legislation” (p. 10). With the loss of DEI offices and cultural centers, these students not only lose resources and safer spaces but may also lose key staff, that is, culturally responsive campus leaders who mentor, advise, counsel, support, and employ Black, Latine, and Native American students. Research on the concept of servingness demonstrates how key staff working with Black, Latine, and Indigenous students improve attrition and academic outcomes (Garcia et al., 2019).

Last, in a recent report, New York University Law’s Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (Pollack et al., 2025) found that DEI leaders took one of three stances in response to anti-DEI policies—fight, flight, or finesse—and that backing away from DEI initiatives created significant talent, financial, and legal risks. The authors suggested “leaders need to ‘walk the talk,’ which means matching their actions to their espoused values” (p. 24), using “finesse” to modify programs so they mitigate legal risk while clearly communicating their ongoing commitment to fairness and inclusion. They also encouraged leaders to “take the big picture,” “take a long-term view,” and “take a global view” (pp. 26–27), which are all systems thinking principles. Near the end of study, Pollack et al. (2025) provided a temporal perspective on DEI leadership during backlash, stating the following:

... from tremendous pressure to conduct the work after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 to tremendous pressure to retreat in 2025. Similar swings have happened before in US history, such as the backlash following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the backlash to affirmative action in the 1980s. This moment, too, will pass. (p. 26)

Communities of Practice

Senior leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change initiatives are frequently isolated and presumed to lead the implementation of transformation with limited institutional support and resources (Grim et al., 2024; Kezar, 2023; Leon, 2014). While the first domain involves exploring DEI’s history and current state, the second domain focuses on CoPs, groups of people in the same profession who work together to get better at what they do (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Investigating CoPs’ history and contemporary state provides a better understanding of their utility, specifically DEI-centered CoPs, for senior leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change efforts. The literature on CoPs includes themes of capacity building; knowledge sharing (Malone, 2019; Wenger, 1998); innovation (King et al., 2023); and the impact of CoPs on organizational processes.

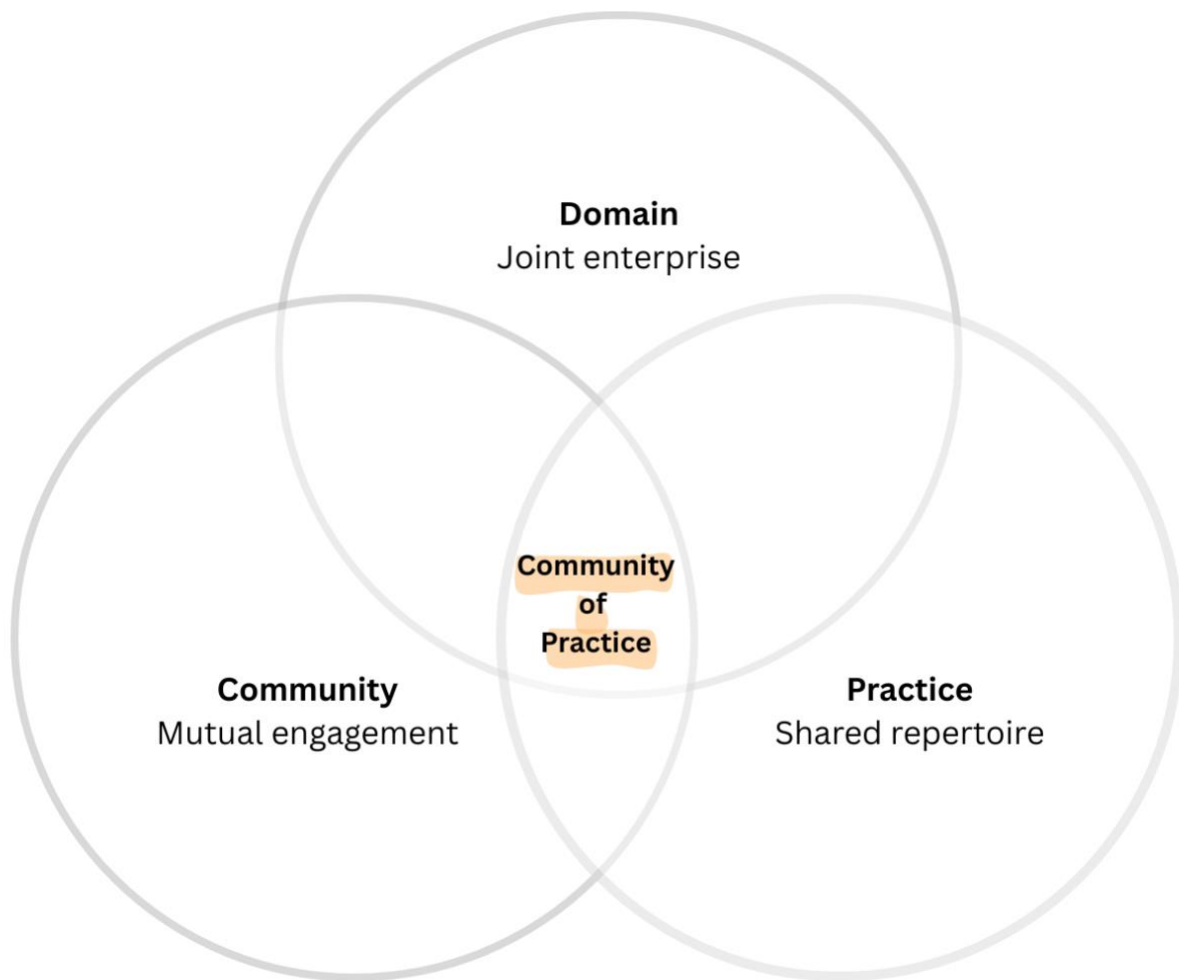
Historical Background

While CoPs “have been around for as long as human beings have learned together” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 3), the term’s coinage and formal use in the literature is credited to Lave and Wenger’s book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Periphery Participation* (1991). A CoP is a group of people who “share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). CoPs are informal groups of people who convene regularly to share and enhance their knowledge. A CoP is composed of

three components: a *domain* (joint enterprise), a *community* (mutual engagement), and a *practice* (shared repertoire; Wenger, 1998). In 1991, anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger coined the term *community of practice* while researching apprenticeship as a learning model (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They investigated global apprenticeship and crafts-making communities to understand how apprentices and novices move from peripheral participation to full participation. The research upended the notion that knowledge moves stepwise from master to apprentice. Instead, Lave and Wenger found that the transfer of knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, occurred multilaterally across a community of apprentices with varying degrees of knowledge acquisition. Wenger (1998) advanced his earlier CoP research on peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where CoP members moved from the periphery to full participation, to duality, where situated learning involves the process of dualities such as participation and reification. These dualities function similarly to praxis (Freire, 1970), where, in the process of learning, CoP members oscillate between participation and reification or action and reflection. Additionally, as Figure 1 shows, Wenger-Trayner (2015) framed the three defining components of CoPs.

Figure 1

Community of Practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 2-3)



1. Domain (joint enterprise): “A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest.”
2. Community (mutual engagement): “In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other. . . . But members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis.”
3. Practice (shared repertoire): “A community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2).

Since the publication of *Situated Learning*, the literature on CoPs has significantly expanded, and the organizational application of CoPs has broadened. Searching peer-reviewed research on *communities of practice* produces over 427,000 results.

Contemporary CoPs

An investigation of the literature on CoPs uncovers several themes, including capacity building, knowledge sharing, and collective intelligence (Malone, 2019; Wenger, 1998); innovation (Brown & Duguid, 2001; King et al., 2023); and the impact of CoPs on organizational processes (Leon, 2014; Lesser & Storck, 2001). The gaps in the literature include the dearth of research on social identity and power within CoPs and the movement of individuals between and across multiple CoPs (Contu, 2013; Handley et al., 2006).

Capacity Building. CoPs build organizational capacity. Lesser & Storck (2001), in their qualitative study of seven companies with functional CoPs, identified “four specific performance outcomes associated with communities of practice” (p. 831), including “connections among practitioners who may or may not be colocated, relationships that build a sense of trust and mutual obligation, and a common language and context that can be shared by community members” (p. 831). In other words, their research revealed that CoPs “are linked to organizational performance through the dimension of social capital” (p. 831), and CoPs improve organizational performance and business outcomes by “decreasing the learning curve of new employees/responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries/reducing rework and preventing ‘reinvention of the wheel’/spawning new ideas for products and services” (p. 836).

Knowledge Sharing and Collective Intelligence. Knowing sharing in CoPs differs from general information. While explicit information is shared in CoPs, tacit knowledge comes from personal experience and inhabits the spaces between formally documented information and knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the difference between the instructions in an electronic device’s manual and the expertise a device repair person acquired over the years.

The nature of this personal knowledge is that it is rooted deeply in the tacit dimension, which are things that they cannot easily say, and therefore cannot be learned by someone else simply through articulation (Polanyi, 1966). Thus, tacit knowledge cannot be transferred directly but it can be redeveloped by participating in practice with others through a process that Pyrko et al. (2017) label as thinking together. (Annala, J., & Mäkinen, M., 2016, p.489)

CoPs also form “superminds” that improve knowledge sharing and organizational outcomes (Brown & Duguid; Lesser & Storck, 2001; Malone, 2019; Meadows, 2009; Valentine & Hinds, 2022; Wenger, 1998). Organizational theorist Malone (2019), who studied collective intelligence and the potential for collaborating communities of humans and computers to improve collective intelligence and organizational processes such as decision-making, coined the term “superminds” to refer to the collective intelligence of groups of people in organizations. While he did not use the term *CoPs*, the groups he described have a domain, a community, and a practice, and, as in Valentine & Hinds’s (2022) study, are leveraging the collective intelligence of humans and computers to improve their organization (Malone, 2019). How might the knowledge sharing and the collective intelligence of DCoPs inform the equity-focused organizational change efforts of senior higher education leaders?

Innovation. CoPs are forums of innovation. For Wenger (2010), CoP innovation comes from the tension inherent in the boundaries of practice or the constraints of domain. Lesser & Storck (2001) added that “peripheral members bringing new ideas can catalyze innovation” (p. 832). Brown & Duguid (2001) “view[ed] learning as the bridge between working and innovating” (p. 41). In higher education, Kezar (2023) and Leon (2014) saw collaborative networks (CoPs) as key to developing the capacity for institutional and cultural change.

Organizational Processes. Handley et al. (2006) investigated reproductive and dialogic organizational processes, highlighting their persistence in CoPs, where CoPs may reproduce

socio-organizational structures, like isomorphism and hierarchy, found into higher education institutions (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Kezar, 2023; Zapp et al., 2021). King et al. (2023) evaluated an equity-focused organizational change initiative and “the role that Communities of Practice (CoP) can play as platforms to foster social learning to drive . . . a paradigm shift” (p. 53).

The idea of CoPs as learning “platforms” has the potential, if properly designed, to aid senior leaders in organizational transformation. Organizational change is challenging because humans resist change at a sociopsychological level (Lewin, 1991; Schein, 2016). Simply stated, human beings view change as a threat. By building capacity and sharing knowledge (Malone, 2019; Wenger, 1998) with colleagues in a social learning environment (Wenger and Lave, 1991), CoPs are not simply fertile ground for innovation (King et al., 2023) and improved organizational processes; they are spaces to discuss, debate, and potentially use social capital to reduce organizational change’s sociopsychological threat (Lesser & Storck, 2001). So what are the gaps in the CoP literature?

Gaps in the Communities of Practice Literature

While the research demonstrating CoPs’ benefits on organizational processes is persuasive (Lesser & Storck, 2001; King et al., 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2022), meaningful critique abounds. Handley et al. (2006) critiqued Lave & Wenger (1991), arguing that CoP analysis avoids the complexity of an individual’s movement across communal structures. They highlighted how individuals move between and across structures such as organizational boundaries and sociocultural identities. “An analysis of (individual) situated learning and knowledge transfer (across communities) thus requires not only a conceptualization of ‘community of practice,’ but also an understanding of what happens within and beyond such communities” (Handley et al., 2006, p. 642). Contu (2013) added that “power struggles have been often overlooked, and a deeper understanding of power dynamics in, and between, communities of practice is needed” (p. 289). Handley et al. (2006) and Contu (2013) identified gaps in the CoP framework and situated learning theory on how “an individual’s continual negotiation of ‘self’ within and across multiple communities of practice may, of course, generate intra-personal tensions as well as instabilities within the community” (Handley et al., 2006, p. 648). In other words, more CoP research must account for other participatory models that track the complex movement of individuals and identities across and between multiple CoPs, across multiple identities, and within systems of power.

Wenger’s views on CoPs evolved over time in response to Handley et al. (2006), Contu and Wilmott (2003), and Yakhlef’s (2010) critiques. In later writings, Wenger (2010) addressed identity and power in CoPs, asserting that “if class, gender, race, institutional roles, government systems and other axes of power become part of our identities, they do so through learning as the production of practice, identity and meaning” (p. 9). That is, he conceded that “the concept of community of practice yields an inherently ‘political’ view of learning, where power and learning are always intertwined and indeed inseparable” (p. 9).

The CoP literature highlights CoPs’ theoretical evolution and meaningful impact on organizational culture including capacity building, knowledge sharing, and incremental innovation (Lesser & Storck, 2001; King et al., 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2022), while exposing the dearth of research on the role of social identity and power within and across CoPs (Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Handley et al., 2006; Yakhlef, 2010). For senior higher education leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change, the literature encourages leaders to be aware of their participation in CoPs, paying close attention to their own social identity and power and the

isomorphic and reproductive potential inherent in CoPs (Bicchi, 2024; Handley et al., 2006). Do DEI-centered CoPs provide benefits or risks not found in CoPs and DEI?

DEI-Centered Communities of Practice

DCoPs are CoPs that aim to improve DEI practitioners' skills (e.g., change management, inclusive budgeting, mediation), organizational actors inspired to or "charged with creating a more equitable environment" (Moore-Southall, T., 2021, p. 13), by building community through sharing knowledge and valuable, industry-specific resources. DCoP members multilaterally share knowledge (Wenger-Traynor, 2015), creating a network of practitioners who help each other grow professionally (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Properly facilitated DCoPs combine DEI and CoPs' benefits—capacity building (Hong & Page, 2004; Wenger, 2010); knowledge sharing (Leon, 2014; Malone, 2019); innovation (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020; Gibbs et al., 2023; King et al., 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2021); and the intentional mitigation of social identity and power dynamics (Ahmed, 2012; Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020, p. 24; Leon, 2014), while institutionalizing DEI principles and practices across silos (Kezar, 2023; Leon, 2014). Poorly facilitated DCoPs may reproduce the risks inherent in DEI and CoPs, including propagation of harmful cultural practices around social identity and power (e.g., domination, blame, shame, gatekeeping, othering; Handley et al., 2006, p. 644); replication and distribution of imprecise knowledge and information; and threats to organizational processes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Zheng, 2022).

While the DEI-does-not-work camp contends that DEI has shown limited success with institutional, systemic, or paradigmatic change (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023; Zheng, 2022), "diverse teams have been shown to be more likely to radically innovate and anticipate shifts in consumer needs and consumption patterns—helping their companies to gain a competitive edge" (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020, p. iii), companies with more "gender and ethnic diversity outperform all other companies" (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020, p. 24), and functionally diverse groups tasked with complex, nonroutine tasks are better problem-solvers (Hong & Page, 2004). Researchers have shown that sustained CoPs improve organizational processes. King et al. (2023), Malone (2019), Valentine and Hinds (2022), and Webber and Dunbar (2019) all addressed CoPs' positive influence on organizational processes and organizational change. Coupling innovative, evidence-based OCM processes and systems-thinking approaches with DCoPs' collective intelligence may lead to improved practices and outcomes for organizations (Valentine & Hinds, 2022).

DCoPs may act as the type of collective intelligence that MIT scholar Tom Malone called *superminds* (Malone, 2019, p. 1). "All superminds have a kind of collective intelligence, an ability to do things that the individuals in the groups couldn't have done alone" (Malone, 2019, p. 34). He claimed that collective intelligence will continue to improve its predictive capabilities as "groups of people and computers" (p. 34) form increasingly more insightful superminds (Malone, 2019; Valentine & Hinds, 2022). That is, "groups of people and computers working together will be able to do many things in the future that neither can do alone now" (Malone, 2019, p. 34). Waariyo et al. (2024) investigated a research-based CoP developing a DEI action plan and found that knowledge mobilization and DEI are mutually reinforcing because both seek to maximize research evidence and support excellence in diverse forms. As the use of AI and knowledge mobilization increases exponentially, senior higher education leaders will be called to combine their DCoPs' tacit and collective knowledge with AI's explicit, algorithmic knowledge toward equity-focused organizational change.

Beach and Segars (2022) conducted a "multiyear field study of 17 organizations" and "identified the four values [representation, participation, application, and appreciation] and seven

principles [build a moral case, encourage willful interrogation, develop new mental models, adopt entrepreneurial leadership, ensure accountability, be ambitious, and expand the boundary] that lead to transformational change” around DEI (pp. 25–26). The research findings led to their values principles model, a “structured and measurable framework for transforming the workplace through DEI” (Beach & Segars, p. 25). In a separate study chronicling a higher education “community of practice on diversity and equity,” Kelley et al. (2020, p. 110) suggested that participation transforms teaching practices by helping members reflect on their own privileges and disrupt bias. They concluded that DCoPs “are institutional mechanisms for collective action” (p. 115). Might collective learning and development around research-backed models such as the values principles model, within DCoPs, have the potential to institutionalize innovative DEI practices that “lead to transformational change” (Beach & Segars, pp. 25–26)?

Additionally, DCoPs may provide complementary opportunities for DEI and CoPs. While the literature on CoPs and their proliferation in global organizations is widespread (Bicchi, 2024; Lesser & Storck, 2001; King et al., 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2022), the lack of detailed explorations of social identity and power—within CoPs, within the institutions they inhabit, and within the broader society—represents a gap in the research (Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Handley et al., 2006; Yakhlef, 2010). DEI professionals, who are highly skilled in examining issues of social identity and power, may be uniquely positioned to address this gap (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2022). Senior leaders tasked with equity-focused change efforts spend a significant time analyzing the root cause of inequity within their organization (Leon, 2014). They might combine the empirical analysis of organizational data with DCoPs’ tacit collective intelligence to improve decision-making (Valentine & Hinds, 2022, pp. 46–47).

Two recent studies increase our understanding of DCoPs as vehicles for change. Margherio et al. (2025) investigated counterspaces within academia, such as STEM conferences, where Black and Brown attendees with “shared commitments to diversity and equity” (value homophily; p. 16) form strong, trusting, nontransactional network ties (p. 1). These counterspaces then organically become examples of unsanctioned, cross-institutional, values-based DCoPs. Gold et al. (2026) investigated how a distributed group of equity advocates maintained momentum on their project during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found that sustainable equity work requires a distributed network of trust and care, relational infrastructure that must be established well before a crisis occurs. In each example, DCoPs are collective, collaborative spaces where values are enacted and reinforced and trust is built, relationally, through participation.

All in all, the persistence of DEI lay in its applicability to all operational areas, while the persistence of CoPs lies in the flexibility and generalizability of the framework (Handley, 2006; Wenger, 2010). Together, DCoPs not only improve organizational processes such as capacity building, knowledge sharing, retention, and innovation (Lesser & Storck, 2001; King et al., 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2022) but also provide senior higher education leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change with a supermind (Malone, 2019), a real-time, human-centered platform for business and cultural intelligence, a way to monitor and assess the health and vitality of the institution and the impact of its equity initiatives on community members. How might senior higher education leaders leverage DCoPs toward meaningful organizational change?

Organizational Change Management and Systems Approaches

Like DEI, OCM’s history traces back to Kurt Lewin’s three-step model and the formation of modern psychology (Burnes, 2019), but human civilization has engaged in the enterprise of

change management since ancient times (Saatçi, 2014). OCM is a set of heuristics and practices distilled from broader, foundational Organizational Theory, spanning “sociology, economics, political science, and management” (Haveman & Wetts, 2018, p. 2), including the scholarship of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and many others (Haveman & Wetts, 2018). In fact, the source of Schein’s (1979) sociopsychological model of learning and change, which underpins modern organizational development theory “is Lewin’s three-step change model” (Coghlan, D., 2020, p. 13)—unfreezing, moving, and freezing (Burnes, 2019).

Similarly, Stouten et al (2018) extended the definition of “planned organizational change as deliberate activities that move an organization from its present state to a desired future state (Harigopal, 2006)” (p. 752). Change management is the creation of “the fluidity necessary for change and to effect the change itself” and the “steps taken to bring about the permanence of the new situation through self-regulation” (Burnes, 2019, p. 39). It is the “unfreezing” of one state, the act of “moving” it to another state, and the process of “freezing” and maintaining the new state. Lewin, a Jewish immigrant who fled Nazi Germany, “developed [the three-step model] as a means of resolving social conflict, such as racism, rather than primarily as an approach to organizational change” (Burnes, 2019, p. 33). In other words, Lewin developed the three-step model to ameliorate social injustice. Schein (2016) built on Lewin’s (1947) three-step model by investigating the “dynamics of deep change or changes to self-identity, where upsetting the current equilibrium involves unlearning and evokes resistance” (Coghlan, 2020, p. 12). “Organizations are collections of people, material assets, financial resources, and information, whose members have common goals that they cooperate to pursue. People create organizations when they cannot achieve their goals by working alone, in small informal groups, in families, or in dispersed social movements” (Haveman & Wetts, 2018, p. 2). Successful organizational change requires people to change. With people in mind, senior higher education leaders must approach equity-focused organizational change holistically, having a “toolkit of concepts” (Trinidad, 2023, p. 2), such as SCRIPTS (i.e., Structure, Culture, Relations, Institutions, Professions, Transformation, and Social Conflict; Trinidad, 2025), to view change efforts from multiple perspectives (Trinidad, 2025).

From “creating the motivation to change,” to “changing,” to “internalizing the change,” (Coghlan, 2020, p. 12, Table 1), Schein’s model moves organizational groups through the sociopsychological process of change. This is important to understand because the process of change anchors the connection between OCM and DEI (Zheng, 2022), and “DEI at present does not create the impact it promises” (Zheng, 2022, p. 32). Schein (2016) contended that change happens below the surface, below the cultural artifacts and our espoused views, in our underlying assumptions. Therefore, “leaders who want to change culture cannot do so by painting the blossoms or pruning the leaves. They have to locate the cultural DNA and change some of that” (Schein, 2016, p. 27). With similar origins and objectives, why are the fields of OCM and DEI not formally aligned? How can a more formalized relationship between DCoPs and OCM shift the DEI-does not-work and DEI-works-as-intended dialogue? The themes in the OCM literature include higher education’s structural resistance to change (Kezar, 2023) and the use of systems thinking and improvement science in equity-focused organizational change efforts (Crow et al., 2019). Searching peer-reviewed journals for *organizational change management* results in 111,023 research papers.

In their ethnographic study, Valentine and Hines (2022) found that company data scientists pushed CoP members “to explicitly articulate the theories underlying their decisions and to use the rigorous analysis enabled by the algorithms to then reject or update those theories”

(p. 1). Their study demonstrates how organizations can improve organizational processes such as decision-making by combining CoPs' tacit, collective intelligence with the business intelligence of organizational change methods and tools (e.g., three-step model, ADKAR [awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement], real-time data analysis, algorithmic knowledge [AI], and OCM software). While DCoPs produce and share tacit knowledge (Wenger, 1998), OCM utilizes large, institutional datasets to distill explicit knowledge (Valentine & Hinds, 2022), which may help change-resistant workers navigate the disconfirmation or the "what is expected is not confirmed" (Coghlan, 2020, p. 12) experience endemic to the organizational change process. These "multiple sources of information" (Coghlan, 2020, pp.13–14) allow for more comprehensive analysis while also providing meaningful intelligence for workers resistant to change. How do the informal, tacit knowledge generated by DCoP members and the formal, empirical knowledge built into OCM processes assist equity-focused leaders? How might senior leaders leverage DCoPs' tacit, collective intelligence alongside the empirical intelligence of algorithmic knowledge to improve decision-making on equity-focused organizational change?

Since the 1990s, OCM has emerged as a recognized field with professional accreditation and powerful practices and tools for organizational change (Prosci Inc., 2021). In one comprehensive study comparing popular, practitioner change models (e.g., Lewin's Three-Phase Process, Beer's Six-Step Change Management Model, Kotter's Eight-Step Model, Hiatt's ADKAR Model [Prosci Inc.], Judson's Five Steps, Kanter, Stein & Jick's Ten Commandments, and Appreciative Inquiry) to scientific research, researchers found that implementation of evidence-based change interventions, on a macro level, must include the following: (a) "Develop Effective Change Leadership Throughout the Organization", (b) "Develop and Communicate a Compelling Change Vision," (c) "Work with Social Networks and Tap Their Influence," (d) "Use Enabling Practices to Support Implementation," (e) "Promote Micro-Processes and Experimentation," (f) "Assess Change Progress and Outcomes over Time," and (g) "Institutionalize the Change to Sustain Its Effectiveness" (Stouten et al., 2018, pp. 774–778). Complementary research on evidence-based change management reinforces these findings, adding evidence-based practices such as "1) Ongoing Actions used throughout the change process (e.g., goal setting, vision communication, and feedback/redesign) and 2) Phased Actions each timed to a specific change phase (e.g., early diagnosis or late-stage institutionalization)" (Rousseau & Have, 2022, p. 1). Organizational theorists Weick and Quinn (1994) asserted that the "tempo of change" is either episodic (infrequent and finite) or continuous (infinite and ongoing), depending on the "conceptualizations" of organizational inertia (p. 361). All this research demonstrates how effective OCM needs adaptive planning, "leadership competency," and organizational readiness for change (Stouten et al., 2018b, p. 773). In other words, organizational change is complex and challenging, with the integrated change efforts needing to persist on the micro, meso, and macro levels. In higher education, change is daunting due to the field's history, structure, and nature, which prioritizes the sanctity of learning (Kezar, 2023). The ivory tower represents an isolated, secure, stable environment for research and scholarship, free from earthly distractions—free from change (Kezar, 2023, p. 2). Kezar (2023) contended that "part of this challenge is baked into higher education as an institution—campuses were NOT meant to change and so their structures and policies have become deeply ingrained in the habitus of what it means to be a postsecondary institution" (p. 2). Kezar suggested that higher education leaders need to "understand that change is systemic. Systems include history, people, structures, resources, policies, values, politics, and ideas. So, unlocking the potential for change will require working across all these levels" (p. 2). Again, Trinidad's (2025) SCRIPTS framework may offer

senior higher education leaders a tool kit for holistically examining and adapting change efforts. Change management is about moving people, places, and practices and their associated and complex interactions through time and space from one state to another (Coghlan, 2020). “All of these insights are more likely to be kept in play if researchers focus on ‘changing’ rather than ‘change’” (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 382).

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking offers a set of powerful tools for senior higher education leaders to see and better understand the systems they aim to change. “Systems thinking involves a fundamental reorientation that replaces this mental model of a university as a series of silos and extends a more global vision, one that emphasizes the constructive value of harnessing our interdependence” (Crow et al., 2019, p. 85).

The shifting of mental models around the systems of higher education are also needed for shifting our perspectives on the concept of organizational change. “The brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail” (Nohria, 2015, p.15), a point often missing in the DEI-does-not-work research (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Stokas, 2023) and the general sociopolitical debate (Hill et al., 2024; Reilly, 2024; Shuman, 2023; Tessema et al., 2023). In higher education, equity-focused change initiatives such as the recruitment and retention of more women and people of color into the professoriate are viewed as enhancements to learning and scholarship’s main goals. “Universities and colleges have lasted for hundreds of years because they serve a core mission and have only undergone changes in incremental ways over time—often after extended debate” (Kezar, 2023, p. 3). Crow et al. (2019) built on the “extended debate” (Kezar, 2023, p. 3), referring to higher education organizational processes as “organized anarchy (Cohen & March, 1986)” (Crow et al., 2019, p. 75). Unlike PK–12 education, higher education’s siloed and decentralized nature may lead to programmatic redundancy and chronic organizational misalignment (Kezar, 2023b, p. 2). The Equity X Governance framework (Morgan et al., 2022) expands on this organizational misalignment by demonstrating how the missing element in higher education transformation lay in the traditional manifestation of higher education governing boards (GBs) and the absence of GBs in the design and implementation of equity-centered organizational change initiatives. The sometimes sudden, and many times radical, need for higher education institutions to change rapidly in response to equity-centered social unrest and external pressures leaves gradually-minded institutions ill-prepared to address the root causes of systems in need of repair and improvement (Kezar, 2023; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023). While DEI-works-as-intended scholars such as Oliha-Donaldson (2020) and Stokas (2023) have expressed low confidence in DEI’s ability to impact change, Crow et al. (2019), Kezar (2018), Kezar (2023), and Kezar (2023b) proffered systems thinking and improvement science as possible approaches to the morass of organizational change in higher education:

Systems thinking, with its emphasis on interactions and interdependence over formal hierarchies, has the potential to be an insightful approach to bring order to the apparent chaos of higher education, but advocates will need to find ways to adapt and disseminate its principles effectively. (Crow et al., 2019, p. 73)

The elements of organizational learning—systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, personal mastery, and team learning (Senge, 2000)—align with the practice of improvement science and we can incorporate these into higher education settings as elements of our change management strategy (Kezar, 2018). (Crow et al., 2019, p. 83)

For senior leaders tasked with implementing equity-focused change initiatives, with “making something come into being” (UVM Continuing Education, 2019), the literature highlights an imperative for them to view change and outcomes through a systems lens. “Systems thinking is cultivating understanding of how organizational elements are interrelated and interdependent in service of a goal or issue in the context of the overall complex system (such as a university)” (Crow et al., 2019, p.78). Systems thinking calls on senior higher education leaders to take on the complicated and continuous process of examining organizational complexity, building capacity, and recognizing “the importance of breaking down silos to help people collaborate across boundaries” (Casciaro et al., 2021, p. 132). Casciaro et al. (2021) and Edmondson (2021) called these systems-minded, collaborative leaders *cross-silo leaders* who “bring employees from diverse groups together on initiatives . . . give people across silos a chance to identify various kinds of expertise within their organization, map how they’re connected or disconnected, and see how the internal knowledge network can be linked to enable valuable collaboration” (Casciaro et al., 2021, p. 138). The design of communities and networks by senior leaders is key to the success of these change initiatives, as “change has a large social component, whereby individual readiness and willingness to accept change can be shaped by the quality of relationships individuals have in the organization and the effects of their peer’s relationships on them” (Stouten et al., 2018, p. 770). A “major strategy for achieving scale is creating networks (Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Kezar, 2011). Networks connect people to others with similar ideas and provide change agents with the information needed to help move along the change process (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011)” (Kezar, 2021, p. 7). Casciaro et al.’s (2021) “internal knowledge network” (p. 138) is another term for community of practice. Wenger (2010) stated, “I find it more productive to think of community and network as combined in the same social structures—but with more or less salience. So the question is not whether a given group is a network or a community, but how the two aspects coexist as structuring processes” (p. 10). Leon (2014), in his multiple case study of eight chief diversity officers (CDOs) leading “predominately white public research institutions in the Midwest” (p. 78), added that “the literature does emphasize that the success of the CDO depends not only on personal characteristics of this officer (e.g., leadership traits, ability to build networks, understanding of organizational change) but also on several organizational design components (e.g., rank, support staff, reporting structure, and resources) that can support or jeopardize the work of this leader” (p. 14). DCoPs are a “knowledge network” (Casciaro et al., 2021, p. 138), a supermind (Malone, 2019, p. 34), a form of “shared leadership” (Kezar, 2023b, p. 2) that equity-minded, cross-silo leaders may employ to build capacity and catalyze organizational change.

Improvement Science

As a complementary to systems thinking, improvement science, “which emphasizes building organization members’ understanding of the problem and its causes, buy-in to improvement, identification of improvement ideas within and outside their organization, and rapid testing of promising ideas through PDSA [plan-do-study-act] cycles” (Lewis, 2015, p.56), is another organizational change modality offering promising outcomes for higher education. “Improvement science is predicated on a set of assumptions about what organizations look like and how they function, but also on the shifting of mental models towards a culture of sustained innovation” (Crow et al., 2019, p. 85).

While improvement science is readily used in PK–12 educational settings, its use in higher education has been limited. In the journal article “Crossing the Streams: Improvement Science, Educational Development and Systems Thinking in Higher Education,” Crow et al.

(2019) described “educational developers” as learning, development, and change specialists “serving in the familiar role as the bridge between (systems and change) theory and (educational) practice” (p. 77). They contended that universities lack the formal infrastructure to train faculty and staff on systems thinking and improvement science modalities outside the teaching and learning centers where educational developers work. Interestingly, DEI professionals also act as a formal “bridge between” theory and practice, with DCoPs as possible distributive platforms toward scalable educational development. “According to Senge, finding ways to move knowledge (not data) across organizational barriers and facilitating deep and inquiring talk about the knowledge are key to building a collective organizational intelligence (Senge et al., 1999)” (Rusch, 2005, p. 114). Meadows (2009) expanded on Senge et al. (1999) with one of her key practices of systems thinking, *honor and protect information*, where she contended that “99 percent of what goes wrong in systems goes wrong because of faulty or missing information.” (p. 15) In this sense, DCoP members trained to assist others in operationalizing system thinking and improvement science approaches could serve as scalable, equity-centered educational developers, utilizing DCoPs to spread “collective organizational intelligence” (Leon, 2014; Malone, 2019).

When examining DCoPs, Handley (2006) and Contu’s (2013) critique of CoPs can be loosely coupled with Stokas (2023) and Oliha-Donaldson’s (2020) critiques of DEI, where DEI, as a practice, may be inadequately designed to address systemic issues of organizational power, identity-based harm, and communal repair; its disposition as “everything and nothing” reveals “how diversity as *object* and *project* is perceived differently by different bodies” (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020, p. 26). Oliha-Donaldson (2020) cited a study on DEI definitions by Bell and Hartmann (2007), stating, “While people of color were concerned with the material consequences of injustice, white respondents emphasized concerns over pluralism, often favoring assimilation” (p. 25). Without clear goals and objectives to address and reduce social injustices, a DCoP may replicate broader gatekeeping efforts that benefit “powerful practitioners” (Handley et al., 2006, p. 644). Beach and Segars’s (2022) values principles model, a research-based DEI organizational change model, helps senior leaders move past the temptation “to see DEI as a set of discrete programs to execute rather than an encompassing effort to transform the organization. But as our research suggests, achieving DEI isn’t a linear process with a set of tasks to be checked off, but rather a commitment to cultivating core values and turning guiding principles into organizational habits” (Beach & Segars, p. 26). In other words, achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion requires an integrative, systems approach (Crow et al, 2019; Kezar, 2018; Meadows, 2009; Stroh, 2015).

King et al. (2023), Malone (2019), Valentine and Hinds (2022), Webber and Dunbar (2019), and Wenger-Traynor et al. (2022) all addressed CoPs’ influence on organizational processes and organizational change. King et al. (2023) chronicled the change management efforts of a natural flood management (NFM) CoP and demonstrated that the “CoP seems to have encouraged some participants to re-think the current governance structures for NFM and the boundaries of current actor networks, raising promise that, if sustained in the longer term, the CoP could induce a paradigm shift” (p. 53). The possibility of the paradigm shift that King et al. referred to came about through an iterative series of small pilots and incremental changes. The process that the NFM CoP engaged in aligned with research on improvement science (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020) and led to changes in the implementation and a reassessment of the often unexamined routines and procedures:

Improvement science . . . is an approach that involves multiple tests of small changes that can cumulatively result in larger, system change. . . . As an applied science, it emphasizes innovation prototyping, rapid-cycle testing, and spread to generate learning about what changes, in which contexts, produce improvements (Cohen Vogel, Tichnor-Wagner, Allen, Harrison, Kainz, Socol & Wang, 2015, p. 262). (Hinnant-Grawford, 2020, p. 28)

The process of incremental change also shows up in the DEI-does-work-if-done-right discourse. Correll (2017) pointed to the “‘small wins’ model for change” that improves gender equity by reducing “the negative effects of stereotypic biases on women’s workplace outcomes” (p. 725). Her organizational case study, aimed at bringing “about change that promotes the production of gender equality” (p. 726), demonstrated how “small wins motivate further action and are the building blocks to larger organizational transformation” (p. 725). Mathematical social scientists Hong and Page (2004) demonstrated through computational experiments “that when selecting a problem-solving team from a diverse population of intelligent agents, a team of randomly selected agents outperforms a team comprised of the best-performing agents” (p. 1). Page (2017) expanded on this research in his book *Diversity Bonus: How Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy* by showing that simply adding one diverse employee with “multiple relevant knowledge bases” (p. 17) to the team leads to significant gains in innovation and complex problem-solving. That is, research demonstrates that DEI does work if done right, and it can activate leverage points in the system that, with persistence, may lead to innovative, incremental organizational change.

Future Directions

The research on DEI, CoPs, and OCM is expanding and evolving. As more organizations utilize them, the need to define them better will increase. Advances in educational development, systems thinking, and improvement science will contribute to the growing body of research on DCoPs and OCM as scholars and organizations refine practices to improve equity-based outcomes. As attacks on DEI intensify, the pressure on senior higher education leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change to show results will only increase. These leaders will be responsible for successfully navigating sociopolitical obstacles while demonstrating measurable outcomes on organizational equity. The gaps in the DEI research include the usage of collective intelligence (DCoPs) to improve decision-making and problem-solving (Malone, 2019; Valentine & Hinds, 2022); synergies between DEI and OCM modalities (ADKAR, improvement science, system thinking); and ideation on the next wave (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020) of equity-based work, which might include systems-based approaches such as Liberatory Design (Anaissie et al., 2021), “which meshes human-centered design (aka design thinking) with complex systems theory, and deep equity practice” (National Equity Project, n.d.) and Targeted Universalism, which calls for “setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals” (Powell et al., 2019, p. 5). If substantive, transformational DEI change is incremental, innovative, and sensitive to the ebbs and flows of sociopolitical events such as George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Executive Order 14173, how might equity-focused senior higher education leaders design resilient organizational change initiatives that produce less “happy talk” (Gibbs et al., 2023, p. 42) and more equitable outcomes?

The gaps in the current CoP literature include the complex movement of individuals across and between CoPs (Handley, 2016; Wenger, 2010); the exploration of power and social identity within and across CoPs (Contu, 2013; Handley, 2016; Wenger, 2010); and the use of CoPs to improve the sharing of knowledge and information (Malone, 2019), enhance decision-

making (Valentine & Hinds, 2022), and catalyze incremental innovation (Brown & Duguid, 2001; King et al., 2023; Lesser & Storck, 2001). The research demonstrates higher education institutions and corporations' strong desire to embed DEI and CoPs in their organizational structure without a strong mandate for substantive organizational change (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023). Organizations view both DEI and CoPs as vehicles for “developing strategic capabilities” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022, p. 18; Zheng, 2023), not as practices for paradigmatic shifts (King et al., 2023; Lesser & Storck, 2001; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023). Yet DCoPs have the potential to elevate the best aspects of DEI and CoPs, including capacity building (Hong & Page, 2004; Wenger, 2010); knowledge sharing (Leon, 2014; Malone, 2019); innovation (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020; Gibbs et al, 2023; King, et al, 2023; Valentine & Hinds, 2021); and the intentional mitigation of social identity and power hierarchies (Ahmed, 2012; Dixon-Fyle et al, 2020; Leon, 2014), while institutionalizing equity-based principles and practices across silos (Kezar, 2023; Leon, 2014). In 3 years, the DCoP I helped develop and oversee grew tenfold. Anecdotally, it has helped with the retention of key staff members and it provided vital resources for my team's equity-centered institutional change work. Because DCoPs are a relatively recent manifestation, more in-depth research is needed to understand DCoPs better as system leverage points (i.e., as learning environments, retention tools, knowledge centers, cross-silo infrastructure, non-bottleneck resources, skunkworks) and how senior higher education leaders might utilize them to navigate sociopolitical threats while advancing equity-focused organizational change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this qualitative case study, I explore how the participation of eight senior higher education leaders in DCoPs at a medium-sized private university in California have their perspectives and practices informed and influenced in ways that advance equity-focused organizational change. As a theoretical framework for this study, I combined SCT, as a theoretical lens, and Liberatory Design, as “an approach to addressing equity challenges and change efforts in complex systems” (National Equity Project, n.d.). SCT involves investigating human behavior in personal, social, and environmental interactions (Wood & Bandura, 1989), framing how humans respond to personal (e.g., social identity) and environmental (e.g., organizational change) stimuli. It provides a critical vantage point for understanding how senior higher education leaders make sense of their roles, positionality, perspectives, and practices while participating in situated social learning. Simultaneously, Liberatory Design, with its origins in feminist liberatory practice (Hooks, 1991; Lorde, 2000); systems theory (Meadows, 2009); and design thinking (National Equity Project, n.d.), provides dialogic contrast as a process-based approach. In this study, I used Liberatory Design in two ways: as a dialogic tool for comparing and contrasting how senior higher education leaders design and implement equity-focused organizational change through their participation in DCoPs, and as a reference tool for analyzing data and how well it answers the following research question:

How does senior higher education leaders’ participation in DCoPs inform and influence their perspectives and practices in ways that advance equity-focused organizational change?

Setting

The setting is a medium-sized, private, R1 institution in California. I specifically selected the university for its size, organizational complexity, and proximity to the researcher’s professional network. The social context is also a component of the setting (Maxwell, 2013b). As of February 2026, 154 state bills have targeted DEI funding, offices, programs, and staff in U.S. higher education institutions (Cutler et al., 2026; Gretzinger et al., 2025; Hill et al., 2024; Reilly, 2024). From nomenclature to operations to the removal of cultural centers and DEI offices, there have been significant “changes at 445 campuses in 48 states and the District of Columbia” (Cutler et al., 2026). In short, federal, state, and institutional actors are closely scrutinizing the entire sector of higher education to identify any policies, programs, centers, or activities that may be construed as “unlawful DEI” practices. In other words, the environment is ripe with anxiety, uncertainty, and trepidation. In one of arguably the most progressive states in the union, California’s higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to highlight time delays in institutional reaction to anti-DEI federal and state policies.

Participants

The participants are eight senior administrators, not faculty, ranging from senior directors to vice provost, who represent schools and business units across the institution. Five participants self-identified as women, three as men. They range in age from the early 40s to mid-60s. In terms of ethno-racial identity (Bristol & Goings, 2018), the leaders self-identified as African American, Black, Latinx, Chicano/a, Latine, and Indian (South Asian). One leader self-identified as a queer, two others as Christian, one as Chicano, and another as Latine. All senior higher education leaders in this study are responsible for implementing equity-focused organizational change efforts in their respective areas. They are members of the same internal DCoP and participate in other regional, state, and national DCoPs external to their organization. To participate in the study, senior leaders were required to lead an aspect of equity-focused

organizational change, through influence or implementation (preferably both), and be a participating member in the same internal DCoP. I recruited 15 participants via email. Eleven senior leaders agreed to participate in the study, but only eight agreed to discuss their current change work candidly. Due to federal and organizational anti-DEI actions, some of the leaders I recruited were released from their positions, others decided it would not be prudent to participate, or they were uncomfortable sharing information about the state of their current work. While I could have investigated other administrative or academic job levels, I focused my research design on senior administrative leaders due to their outsized role in influencing and advancing equity-focused change initiatives.

Table 2

Chart of Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Age	Organizational Change Duties	Years at Organization
AMAYA	South Asian	woman	40s	Instructional education	< 10
CATHY	Black	woman	50s	Business and workforce development	> 15
DARRYL	African-American	man	60s	Policy making, compliance, crisis management	< 30
EMILIANO	Latine	man	40s	Campus culture, student engagement, crisis management, retention & persistence	> 10
ISABELLA	Latina	woman	50s	Campus culture, faculty engagement	>20
MATEO	Chicano	man	60s	Graduate student recruitment, development, retention & persistence	< 15
NANCI	Black	woman	50s	Change management, learning & development, campus engagement	< 15
ROSIE	Black	woman	60s	Business and workforce development, events management	< 10

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of 60-minute, semistructured interviews with eight senior higher education leaders from the same medium-sized private institution. I conducted follow up interviews with two leaders who were released from the institution and found new, non-DEI roles—one as a managing director and other as a chief operations officer. I conducted the interviews using video conferencing technology. I used Zoom to capture data and stored them on my local hard drive.

Data Analysis

I coded the data from the 60-minute, semistructured interviews to identify patterns. Using a data analysis matrix (Maxell, 2013b), I developed initial codes and subcodes, including relational trust, collaboration, resource sharing, and support. Then I conducted four rounds of coding to locate connecting ideas and establish broad categories to build upon in the creation of themes and subthemes. I further analyzed evidence for these themes to generate the findings for this study. To mitigate individual bias, I utilized inter-coder reliability, which “refers to the degree of agreement among independent coders in their categorization or interpretation of data” (Choi, 2025, para. 1). For inter-coder reliability, two education researchers reviewed, analyzed, and validated over 80% of my thematic coding.

Positionality

For the past 30 years, I have been a DEI specialist, helping universities, nonprofits, and corporations find success with their DEI initiatives. In a previous role, I served as DEI director at the same medium-sized private university in California. In this role, my team oversaw a burgeoning DCoP and the implementation of the institutional strategic plan for equity-focused organizational change. While my role provided me with access and agency to the institution’s equity-focused organizational change initiative, it may increase investigator bias in this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The findings illuminate the research question in several ways. First, the senior higher education leaders consistently participated in multiple DCoPs, finding the act of participation essential to their growth, well-being, and the success of their equity-focused work. Second, DCoPs act as hubs for explicit information and tacit knowledge sharing, for thinking together and sharing informal forms of cross-silo information, like experience-based storytelling, that surface situational knowledge unavailable to most senior higher education leaders. This collective intelligence poses benefits and risks for senior higher education leaders and their organizations. Third, senior higher education leaders' participation in DCoPs informed their systems leadership, furthering their objective to see their beloved organizations become more equitable. Last, terminated senior higher education leaders pursued a type of career-based sublimation, using their unique talents, skills, and the DCoP collective to move from high-risk, attack-prone DEI roles (solid) to low-risk, ubiquitous roles such as finance and operations (gas).

The major findings include the following:

1. Multiple DCoPs: Senior higher education leaders participated in multiple DCoPs that were both internal and external to their organization.
2. Information Sharing: Information and knowledge sharing within and across DCoPs presented benefits and risks.
3. Systems Leadership: Senior higher education leaders' participation in DCoPs informed their systems change leadership.
4. Sublimation: A movement by senior higher education leaders from high-risk DEI roles (solid) to low-risk operational roles (gas).

Multiple DEI-Centered Communities of Practice

The first finding is that senior leaders participated in multiple DCoPs internal and external to their organization. The curation of these various DCoPs provide senior leaders with information, guidance, and support. Generally, internal DCoPs facilitate intraorganizational work related to specific populations, initiatives, and areas of expertise (e.g., Graduate Recruitment Council, Women Learn, Women Lead, IT Diversity Working Group). External DCoPs serve primarily as support systems, spaces where senior leaders can share their successes, challenges, and struggles openly among peers. They also provide leadership development and networking opportunities. All leaders in this study participated in at least one internal and one external DCoP, while over half participated in more than one internal and external DCoP. Interestingly, this finding contradicted my expectation that senior higher education in this study would primarily discuss their role in organization's internal DCoP.

Internal DCoPs

Nanci, a self-identified Christian Black woman, who oversaw equity-focused graduate recruitment efforts early in her leadership career, recounted the formation of an internal DCoP out of a need to maximize resources:

Interestingly, there was not one when I first started here at [the university]. So me and one of my peers decided to create one . . . a community of practice built around staff who work on the graduate student pipeline . . . I think the thing that coalesced for us was when two or three of us showed up at the same conference, where we each spent \$1,500 on a table and realized we're all by ourselves. We really could have shared the table.

Mateo, a senior administrator who participated in the same internal DCoP Nanci cofounded, recounted how this same recruitment-focused DCoP, years later, spurred the creation of a recruitment dashboard, a tool now indispensable to institutional graduate recruitment:

I remember my vice provost saying, this will never happen. I just wasn't gonna take that for an answer. So, it took about 8–10 months, but it finally happened and it changed the emphasis . . . I think it changed the conversation around things like yield . . . we wouldn't have had created the tool had we not heard from the community that they needed it.

That's number one. Like, [it] wouldn't have existed. And then the tool itself really helped us think a little more strategically. And to this day, it does that.

Cathy, another senior leader from an operational business unit, created a people-centered change model for staff development in her internal unit to circumvent growing anti-DEI animus. Her model relied heavily on CoPs and staff engagement, not simply shifting the nomenclature from DEI to People & Culture, but by helping her unit “to expand diversity and equity [work], because it created communities of practice. It gave individuals that were looking for stretch opportunities, those opportunities to get to know people in other offices . . . to learn from each other.”

The collective structure of internal DCoPs, where initiatives are advanced via consensus and local information and knowledge are shared, assisted senior higher education leaders with perspective-taking, helping to inform their equity-focused organizational change strategy and influencing their decision-making. In Nanci's case, the internal DCoP enhanced her perspective on resource sharing; for Mateo, the social force generated by the internal DCoP was key to the creation of a graduate recruitment tool; and for Cathy, the formation of internal DCoPs was a key tactic for the adoption of her new people-centered model by staff.

External DCoPs

External networks provide cross-institutional support, helping leaders clarify policies and approaches while elucidating cultural manifestations such as class and gender dynamics in private higher education institutions. Emiliano, a self-identified queer, male, senior leader of color from a low-income background, described grounding his class privilege assumptions with members of his external DCoP:

It definitely affirmed my class consciousness, of all my identities. Coming to a private [university], I knew. I was very aware and clear about my class background growing up and how it informed my college years and getting through. But . . . when I talk to my colleagues across [private institutions], the class thing feels very affirming. Like not everybody knows a US senator, right?

Nanci noted the importance of her participation in an external DCoP, the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, where she “became part of” a regional chapter, meeting “regularly, like every few months. We would actually meet and talk about what was going on and share ideas and updates and brainstorm or whatever else. And so that became an overlapping community of practice in that space.”

While external DCoPs, like internal DCoPs, also assisted senior higher education leaders with perspective-taking, strategy, and decision-making, the inputs were different. External, national DCoPs surfaced macro perspectives, increasing leaders' intra-organizational understanding, while providing safer spaces for senior leaders to receive development and support from peers. Emiliano's participation in a national, external DCoP grounded his assumptions around class privilege in private educational institutions, while Nanci's participation in the NADOHE chapter created sustained engagement and support amongst regional peers, developing her leadership practice and increasing her interorganizational network ties.

These cases suggest that each DCoP offers senior leaders a distinct and differentiated experience. No DCoP is the same, membership across DCoPs is an act of curation, and

participation in multiple DCoPs enhances the leader's knowledge and network. Moving between DCoPs, internally and externally, provides senior leaders with information, capacity building, support, and affirmation.

Support Systems

Multiple DCoPs combine to create meaningful support systems for senior higher education leaders. All leaders in this study credited the support they received from their DCoPs with helping them navigate isolation, recognize individual strengths and weaknesses, improve well-being, and impact change.

While conservative think tanks have begun in the last few years to use the term *administrative bloat* to refer to an increase in DEI staff in higher education (Greene, n.d.), the leaders in this study highlighted the opposite experience for equity-focused practitioners— isolation and loneliness. While elaborating on the concept of being in a community, Emiliano said, “The other thing we don’t talk about in this work is the loneliness of it. How many of us are hired as the one person in the one role to solve all of these things, but I don’t have a peer, right?” Senior leaders expect a sense of isolation within their unit or division. Many expressed being the only woman, the only brown person, or the only queer person at their level. Institutional DCoPs allow them to give and receive support from community members and leaders in other units and divisions. External DCoPs provide a sense of cross-institutional community, camaraderie, and support. Nanci shared that one of her external DCoP colleagues, a cross-institutional peer, called her and said the following:

Hey, let me just describe to you what I just went through. I want to make sure that I’m not reading it wrong . . . I want to make sure that I’m not overreacting or seeing something that wasn’t there . . . It creates these relationships and this level of trust and respect, that when you need that personal kind of support, you feel like you have people to whom you can go to for that even if the way that you met was part of this working together.

She called it the “power of community,” where DCoP members supported her, relied on her, and “saw things in me that maybe I didn’t recognize as special . . .” In this way, her DCoP not only supported her mental health and wellness but became a place for leadership and personal reflection.

Emiliano shared a similar sentiment, the importance of being in a community with external DCoP members who recognized his strengths and worked with him to be a more impactful leader:

However, that’s dramatically outweighed by the positive, which is to be affirmed in my identity and experiences, to be affirmed in the joy of supporting and loving students through one of the most exciting times in their lives, to be innovative and more flexible and collaborative in our thinking, to get new ideas or to drop old ones, to take risks and talk things out with people that I know want me to be successful, but my ideas may not be fully baked yet or need some workshopping from people that I trust or have an expertise that I don’t have, right?

The concept of trust was frequently attributed to DCoPs throughout this study. Like Emiliano, Mateo found that shared values and the level of trust in his internal recruitment DCoP led to open inquiry and constructive dialogue. He recounted that “we have similar sets of values and intents behind what we’re doing, and that creates a lot of trust. So we can all speak very openly about the challenges and also the paths forward.” As Mateo, Nanci, and Emiliano recounted the benefits inherent in well-managed DCoPs with clear goals and objectives, other

leaders such as Darryl and Amaya surfaced risks such as positionality and groupthink. Amaya explained that well-meaning, powerful people (e.g., faculty, deans, senior leaders) can shift power dynamics “within a team . . . same old hierarchy . . . it’s always the faculty lead who gets the final say, or who talks the most, or whatever it is.” Darryl added that “a community of people that aren’t as diverse in their thinking, and they all see things in a same or similar way . . . may be undermining opportunities for change.”

That said, all senior leaders agreed that the benefits of DCoPs outweighed the risks when implementing equity-focused organizational change efforts. Nanci recounted her essential participation in her school’s effort to remove the GRE from the admissions process, potentially increasing the number of underrepresented students recruited and accepted into her program. With this GRE change campaign, Nanci, a director at the time, had to lead from the shadows. The dean tasked her with developing a proposal to convince the faculty senate to approve the GRE measure in 2 weeks. The chances of success were minuscule, but Nanci succeeded by leveraging her internal and external DCoPs’ collective wisdom and know-how. When reviewing email exchanges for the GRE change effort, Nanci stated the following:

The sense of power, however—the power of community . . . And when I go and look back at my old emails from that amazingly 2-week period of time when I was told to do it and when we submitted the proposal to the Senate subcommittee . . . who did I reach out to—my community of practice. Hey, what do you all think? Do you think that any of your schools might be on board with this? Hey, can you review this draft and let me know if you see any issues? Hey, can you talk to your dean and see if they can? If they’re willing to write a letter of support if they’re actually supportive of it? Like without that kind of community, where we already had established trust . . . that they understood the urgency of it . . . I could not have pushed that through if I did not have that community.

That helped me to do it. I couldn’t do it by myself . . . it’s a world of difference.

Nanci described this as a high point in her leadership development career.

The support from Emiliano’s external, national, inter-institutional DCoP helped him navigate his new role in private higher education. The DCoP members educated him on private higher education institutions’ cultural and sociopolitical nuances. He stated the following:

So issues around anti-Blackness, some of the sexism, the xenophobia, the push and pull around this current geopolitical conflict of the hour has been really wild. So to have that validation and clarity around no, these things are real, and they’re pretty consistent across [institutions], has been key. I would say the naming of the issues, being clear about them, strategy around how do we address them and support each other.

The support senior higher education leaders received from DCoP members made them feel less isolated and more valued while informing and bolstering their equity-focused change efforts. Darryl expounded on the power of community, sharing that the idea of being in community “is something that, in and of itself, is energizing, and frankly, good for our mental health and our physical health, right? And sometimes it’s the tangible, and sometimes it’s the intangible.”

As sociopolitical and economic pressure builds at institutions balancing their commitments to DEI and the advancement of equity against the potential loss of federal funding due to noncompliance (i.e., decreases in NIH/NSF research funding, increases in endowment taxes, etc.), all of the leaders in this study recounted the deep sense of betrayal, consternation, anger, and loss they experienced from their DCoPs’ cessation or institutional pausing. Amaya shared that her internal DCoP had been “driven underground” by the administration, and she felt

“real empathy and sort of sadness for people who aren’t yet connected and who really need to get connected, and now don’t have visible or as explicit signals to know who to go to and how to do it.” Rosie expressed her consternation at the administration’s decision to move the primary team responsible for advancing equity-focused organizational change from a well-resourced center of excellence to another underfunded unit. She saw it as the administration’s clear tactic to exit the team quietly; last year, the administration released the entire team from the university due to budget cuts. She recounted as follows:

And so I said, what happens if they come after private schools? . . . So what happens if somebody says we’re going to take your research funding if you don’t eliminate DEI? And people just kind of laughed like it was just the most stunning, ridiculous thought, until it happened . . . And I knew, at some point, something like this was going to come down, because I clarified that.

Emiliano found himself on a flight for an upcoming external DCoP meeting, only to find out the hosting institution had cancelled the meeting. He had been dealing with student activism around the Israel-Hamas War and needed this convening, needed the support of this community to provide perspective and insight. He described it as follows: “When we had encampments on campus, being able to call colleagues . . . and say . . . What am I missing here? . . . so that community of practice and having those colleagues was very, very helpful in that instance.”

So he scrambled to contact other DCoP members, only to find that some were using “burner” phones to avoid organizational and federal surveillance. He flew there anyway and met with the members he could locate. He shared the following, since the congressional hearing with presidents from Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (source): He shared the following, since the televised congressional hearing on increased antisemitism in higher education with presidents Claudine Gay from Harvard University, Elizabeth Magill from the University of Pennsylvania, and Sally Kornbluth from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Treisman, 2023):

People have been less comfortable engaging. It’s been really hard to not have that emotional support . . . I don’t feel comfortable venting to people that report up to me, it feels unfair and unjust . . . That’s too much for them to hold, right? And I most certainly don’t feel it would be the most strategic use of my time to vent with my supervisor. So I mean, not having this, and this has actually happened, our community of practice essentially disappeared this quarter across the country, with folks who do what I do because people are too afraid, or they’ve lost their jobs. And it’s been difficult to not have a gut or pulse check. So I find out stuff online or through emails or I’ll call or text one of them, one on one.

While all DCoPs provided some level of support, external DCoPs stood out for senior leaders in this study as one of the few places where they could express themselves constructively, amongst peers, and receive much-needed socioemotional support alongside strategic insight, reflection, and development.

Learning and Guidance

In addition to support systems, multiple DCoPs serve as a learning ground for leadership and professional development. Leaders in this study also expressed how DCoPs are spaces of learning configured to advocate for underserved campus populations and to test promising strategies and heuristics toward meaningful and lasting outcomes. All study participants ground their work in a commitment to creating equitable outcomes for historically marginalized populations (e.g., undocumented students, first-generation students, underrepresented staff and

faculty). They all credit DCoPs with increasing their understanding of issues impacting marginalized, minoritized, and vulnerable populations and providing collective intelligence and heuristics toward solving institutional disparities. Darryl shared that “the broader . . . that community of practice is . . . and the more you engage with people within that community, the more opportunities there are for you to learn.” Emiliano added texture to the concept of DCoPs as a learning ground by explaining how his curated network of practitioners, who inform his leadership practice, form a curated DCoP through a shared domain, identity, and friendship:

I think the communities of practice are such an important part of learning, right? . . . I think communities of practice hold a really important space to not just provide emotional support, but to really support our learning together as a collective whole—to hear how folks across are holding the work and moving through it . . . I have . . . at least 10 or 12 queer folks in higher ed that I’ve known throughout my career that work at various institutions in different roles, from faculty to staff, that I view as part of a community of practice for me—that really do inform my work. We’re all in drastically different contexts with different titles, but aligned in our shared view of justice and love and the liberatory power of education.

Nanci discussed her equity-minded leadership as a desire to make everyone better:

A big part of my role over the years has been to think about how can I make this better for them . . . how can we create a structure that will allow us to support one another . . . I want all y’all to be successful. And so that community gave me a space to practice that in.

Cathy recalled how her DCoP helped her “to not be afraid to distribute power”; Isabella discussed “strategies, news, information” with her internal DCoP and learned early on that the key for change initiatives to “sustain over time” . . . is collaboration; and Mateo recounted how he shifted his mental model and found himself “working with new ideas” in his internal DCoP. Cathy shared her people-centered model, fearing the organization would claim ownership of her IP, only to be shifted by her internal DCoP members who helped her “to realize that even if someone steals your work, or if someone tries to undermine your leadership, at least, you have been open to give people a chance.” Isabella’s internal DCoP helped her understand consensus by design or collaboration as a strategy for collective wisdom, collective agency, and collective buy-in. She shared, “My perspective is that we can go further together.” Mateo led recruitment initiatives before the current wave of DEI existed. His internal DCoP members have taught him how equity work continues to evolve. Without the DCoP he contended, “It would be hard to get good information.”

DCoPs have allowed these senior leaders to assume greater responsibility, contribute to solution-making beyond their purview, fail, and reiterate in a safer environment. The internal DCoP Nanci created to focus on graduate diversity recruitment gave her “a space to practice that [equity work] in. Particularly amongst people, once again, who are often severely under-resourced, under-recognized, and under-appreciated . . . And so creating that kind of space, I think, for me as a leader, was very important.” She went on to describe how a newer, institution-wide DCoP, “the DEI community of practice . . . gives them a chance to do things that are beyond the confines of what is their job to do in scope, and to do things that have a much more broad impact across the university.”

Nanci’s face brightened when she said the following:

And just the idea that when you’re doing really hard stuff in community, you find a certain joy, even in the midst of the pain of doing it. That it might be something that takes

a lot of time or energy or a lot of mental focus. But when you're doing it with someone else, and you can stop and laugh and joke, you know, kind of laughing at yourself about what just happened and things like that, that it just makes the work so much easier when you're not alone.

In every interview, leaders discussed DCoPs as learning spaces where members collaborated on or cocreated projects, where they investigated complex systems, and where the community provided an enriching experience to members.

Information and Knowledge Sharing

The second finding is that information sharing within and across DCoPs poses benefits and risks. DCoPs comprise a domain, a community, and a practice for the primary purpose of sharing tacit knowledge and information about DEI toward the improvement of organizational processes, capacity, and culture. While sharing information is standard practice for functional organizations, DCoPs are informal, cross-silo communities, which increases the opportunity to share restricted information. As equity-focused communities, DCoP members may share and exchange confidential, private, and sensitive information about organizational practices (e.g., inequitable hiring policies, routines taken for granted), social identity and power dynamics (i.e., managerial behavior, pay equity, discrimination), and IP.

Leaders in this study pointed to the benefits of information and knowledge sharing in DCoPs, including an increased understanding of institutional or peer-institutional practices and dynamics, improved communication, and collective problem-solving. Emiliano appreciated the information he gained from his external DCoP. While he has spent over 20 years in higher education, this was his first time working at a private institution that “cares a lot about reputational risk . . .” During the interview, he explained the following:

Members of my external DCoP play this whole idea . . . Well, what's Stanford doing, what's Harvard doing, what's Yale doing? Like that's the currency . . . and you sort of use that as much as you can, in the most ethical ways that you can. I think that, for me, has been one of my ways I've navigated my experience of it.

By participating in this external DCoP, Emiliano can leverage the tacit knowledge and tested tactics (“currency”) of peer leaders from comparable institutions.

Another benefit of information and knowledge sharing was improved communication and practice. For the senior leaders I interviewed, the information and knowledge that DCoP members from peer institutions shared helped them by providing practical approaches toward navigating issues such as student free speech and the current sociopolitical backlash to DEI. Emiliano said that his external, national DCoP focused “a lot on undocumented students, free expression,” and asked him to “do a presentation on how we're working on free speech or free expression.” And while drafting his university's institutional strategic plan for DEI, Darryl took advice from DCoP members, sharing that “the conversations and inputs from my peers and other schools were really instrumental.” As someone who has inhabited the organization for decades, Mateo confided that he tries to “share everything” that he can as a way to teach institutional change to other internal DCoP members. He provided examples of the advice he shares with other members, such as “They're going to want to see that your dean supports this first before you come to us, or here's what I am hearing about fee waivers.”

Emiliano encapsulated his thoughts on how DCoPs help members solve problems related to equity and inclusion:

Okay, so, we all agree that this is a problem. So then, so what now? What have you done on your campus? And we share ideas and just throw it on the table. And then we

encourage people to go shopping. Take this, use that. Try this. Let me—can I help you with that?

Nanci added to Emiliano's perspective on the benefits of collaboration, identifying the ways DCoPs increase the potential for collective problem solving:

I would say the work of DEI can be particularly isolating. It's usually under-resourced, and it's an area where the possibility to do harm is much greater than in many other spaces because of the nature of the work . . . But with 10 or 15 of us in the room, we could compile our cumulative resources and knowledge and time and actually do something really impactful . . . especially when you're in a single organization; it helps to create alignment and continuity . . . kind of roam between the different worlds . . . It gives them a chance to do things that are beyond the confines of what is their job to do . . . to do things that have a much more broad impact across the university.

While information and knowledge sharing in DCoPs can be beneficial, trust and transparency pose institutional risks. In the interview with Nanci, she revealed that once a community member breaks trust, it may fracture the community:

We have this community and someone broke from trust. It made me never ever want to be that person to anyone. Like I just saw something that was painful. And now we can never have a circle of trust with this community again, when this person is in the room.

Nanci's comments on trust also address power and its relationship to trust. Does the community dynamic shift when the untrustworthy person has institutional power and status? Nanci proffered that the following:

Something is said in a closed-door meeting that you then hear about from a senior leader. And you're thinking how did that get to you directly? That wasn't appropriate. And so that is a risk because you hope that everyone has good intentions. You hope that everyone is thinking more of the collective than of themselves, but they might not be. And sometimes you don't understand that until it's too late.

The risk of assuming "good intentions" demonstrates how trust or the lack of trust may manifest interpersonally and institutionally in a DCoP.

Transparency offers another risk to information sharing among DCoP members. Emiliano contended that too much information sharing might cause DEI practitioners to abandon higher education altogether. With a chuckle, he mused:

Sometimes when we get in these spaces, it's like, why are we doing this? We should all just leave and go work somewhere else. And if I'm going to have to do this work in a place that isn't supporting my values, then why not sell all the way out and work for Apple or Google or L'Oreal . . . So that's some of the danger. Do I really want to do this for the next 20 to 25 years?

Emiliano also discussed how his private institution cared "a lot about reputational risk," how "we almost lead from that place." DCoP members' transparent sharing of institutional information, internally and externally, poses strategic, operational, and political risks, all of which have the potential to increase reputational risk.

In response to sociopolitical and organizational pressures, most senior higher education leaders in this study moved sharing behind closed doors, developing new, sometimes covert methods for communicating, connecting, and sharing information. For example, after the administration and general counsel advised all units to discontinue any programming highlighting specific identity groups, Rosie decided to continue hosting cultural events but

moved the traditionally in-person events to Zoom, restricting access to members of her team. She affirmed the following:

I still hold events, cultural events, educational events, because in order for us to work together, spend time together and embrace each other's differences, they must . . . learn about each other's cultures. So my whole framework for equity, inclusion, belonging, fairness has not changed . . . when I was asked, and a lot of leaders were asked, to not do that anymore because of the mandates and also because of cost cutting, I said, Okay, I'm not going to hold them in person . . . I'm going to hold them on Zoom!

In similar fashion, Amaya was working with other members of her discontinued internal DCoP to create a secret, equity-focused book club, where "once you enter, you know what book we're reading . . .", in an attempt to shield the group and the organization from any backlash.

In addition to trust and transparency, DCoPs may reproduce risks associated with organizational culture such as positionality (i.e., social identity, hierarchy, and power) and groupthink. Darryl and Amaya surfaced these risks. Amaya explained that well-meaning, powerful people (e.g., faculty, deans, senior leaders) can shift power dynamics "within a team . . . same old hierarchy . . . it's always the faculty lead who gets the final say, or who talks the most, or whatever it is." Darryl added that "a community of people that aren't as diverse in their thinking, and they all see things in a same or similar way . . . may be undermining opportunities for change."

So while I expected information and knowledge sharing, I was surprised to learn how senior higher education leaders in this study participated in DCoPs to obtain, distribute, and co-create explicit information and tacit knowledge, as a strategy.

Systems Change Agent

The third finding is that senior higher education leaders approach equity-focused change from a systems perspective; they lead as systems change agents, strategically influencing organizational change and being influenced through their participation in multiple DCoPs, where they are encouraged to slow down and approach change collectively. When describing organizational change efforts, every leader in this study expressed perspectives and practices that align with system thinking and systems change approaches, where critical collective consciousness and critical collaborative action, or praxis, served as tactical manifestations of a larger strategic vision to enact and operationalize sustainable, equity-centered organizational change. Senior higher education leaders in this study designed organizational change as a supra-individual process, where change occurs through collective and collaborative processes. These leaders spoke directly to systems-thinker approaches such as perspective-taking, seeking to understand the big picture, using successive approximations (incremental change), building meaningful connections, and being aware of time delays.

In one response, Emiliano highlighted five systems thinking principles– "Seeks to Understand the Big Picture" (slowing down), "Makes Meaningful Connections Within and Between Systems" (collective intelligence from multiple DCoPs), "Considers How Mental Models Affect Current Reality and the Future" (counter narratives), "Changes Perspective to Increase Understanding" (shift perspective to student support), and "Uses Understanding of System Structure to Identify Possible Leverage Actions" (*Thinking Tools Studio*, n.d.) – in reflecting on his DCoPs and their impact on his leadership. He stated the following:

I'd say, big picture, being part of a larger community of practice focused on DEI principles, work, and strategies has helped me create a sense of community and belonging and purpose. Working at a deeply conservative institution and having a

community of colleagues across a very decentralized organization has really helped me feel sort of less gaslit by rhetoric and fear and false narratives of the scarcity of resources, and it has empowered me to slow down and think about being more strategic. It has also given me a vantage point to understand that I can leverage the system in specific ways to operate from a place of empowerment and dignity for our students.

In addition to slowing down and collaborating, when asked about his steps to enact change, Emiliano starts by touching base with external DCoP members to gauge the climate and national institutional will for the equity-focused change. Addressing the current DEI climate, he offered, “There has been heightened scrutiny on my work and our work since [fall 2023], and so much so that we’ve had to take websites down. We’ve had to reframe some of our language.” Emiliano’s grounding as a systems leader allowed him to observe and utilize another system thinking principle—Time Delays—to augment his own change efforts:

One example is when they were trying to comb and take everything off of websites. I could talk to my colleagues and say, Well, how did you all do this? . . . they wiped it all clean, or they archived it . . . we would test things out . . . we could try different small strategies. And that’s just a small one, like on websites. But talking about ethnic themed graduations, scholarships, retention programs, we could watch how it was playing out on the East Coast, in a lot of ways, and watch it slowly come this way. And it would give me time to think about how I could advocate, or ask for support, or think about the larger network. One thing I learned from my colleagues is that you really have to think about all of the players in this system.

Similarly, Isabella shared that her internal DCoPs allows her “to form a complete picture of what’s going on.” As a systems leader, she uses her DCoPs “as a form of knowledge building and awareness of what is going on across the university,” and as a way, like Emiliano, to understand “the timing of stuff . . .” She confessed the internal DCoPs are at the heart of strategic foresight, allowing her to see what’s “coming down the line,” and “being more thoughtful . . . more effective and efficient, because we’re not being surprised by these things.”

As a systems leader, Rosie, like Nanci, Isabella, and others, used collective intelligence as a leverage action, as a strategy, as a key component in the design of her policymaking. Isabella shared that she takes “in a lot of feedback from people at all levels and from all backgrounds. I believe that’s the only way that you can glean information that will allow us to create a framework or policy that will support the majority of folks.”

As a systems leader with over 20 years of higher education experience, Darryl has seen these anti-equity attacks come and go. He seeks to understand the big picture, knowing that systems, like universities, are hard to change, even with intense external and internal pressure. When asked about federal attacks on DEI, Darryl viewed them as a distraction from the university’s core mission. Instead of panicking in response to the federal mandates, he expressed the need to remain steadfast and “anchor yourself to something that is not going to shift. Understand that the influences that occur at any one point in time are transitory and you need to have that anchor.”

Mateo attested to the impossibility of the GRE initiative without the collective sharing of information and the power of decentralization, where one major school advocated to remove the GRE requirement at their school as an act of academic freedom. The faulty Senate ended up approving the GRE requirement measure, not because they all agreed with the approach, but because no other school wanted to lose their abilities to act independently. As a systems leader,

Mateo reflected on the combination of decentralization and academic freedom as leverage actions for change:

There are times when we lament that things should be centralized. That's a great example of what you can do when it's not. And how profound of a cultural shift you can create in a different way through one department's actions or one division's actions. It's pretty powerful.

Amaya, a senior leader responsible for capacity building and organizational change through learning and development, gained a systems perspective through her internal DCoPs by participation in "cross disciplinary conversations" and interactions, where she realized that "a lot of people are trying to do things in positively hostile departmental climates." She shared that sometimes, unknowingly, community members with more hierarchical power—deans, faculty, senior administrators, etc.—disrupt the learning experience by commanding others, making the decision on a plan of action, or invalidating others. She mused:

Individual knowledge and skill development is important, but a very small piece. And that, in fact, cultural and systemic factors and incentives, messages—explicit and implicit—were, in a way, much more important to address in terms of people's ability to affect change . . . So we can't just share the practices and say, Great, see you later. That if we really take our role to be not just sharing knowledge, but helping to support the implementation and assessment of those practices on campus, then we also have to reimagine our role as helping to be on top of the change literature and be able to give some of those recommendations of how to actually enact the change . . .

In response to this dynamic, her team utilized the Prosci AKDAR model as a framework for designing cross-disciplinary organizational change.

Systems are immense and complex, and no single leader can truly see them alone. DCoPs' collaborative structure encouraged more deliberation and perspective-taking among leaders in this study, engendering a systems thinking mindset and approach, alongside an increased awareness of their positionality. The senior higher education leaders in this study are not able to think solely about the change effort; as a systems thinker, in the skin they are in, they must also consider their status and the stereotype threat that comes with being a senior leader with marginalized identities and the inherent pushback that comes from being a purveyor of change. During her interview, Rosie shared that "many women come to me to talk about how did you get to where you are, and how did you maintain your leadership over the many years?" How might colleagues perceive Rosies's change effort? As personal? As political? As a preference for one gender over another? Years before the rise of current anti-DEI sentiments, these leaders faced resistance to their change efforts and their identities as minoritized leaders charged with advancing change. So the need for a change initiative to be collaborative, incremental, and systematic is as functional as it is strategic. It provides agency and builds consensus, while it reduces the psychological threat response associated with change. Nanci shared the following:

Some people might say that I am someone who often advocates for incremental change, and not immediately transformative change. And I would say yes. Yes, I'm not wanting to change the world tomorrow, it's got to catch up. Because I don't believe that that's effective in the long term.

Sublimation: From a Solid to a Gas

The last but perhaps most significant in terms of recent federal anti-DEI policies is the movement of leaders from high-risk, targeted DEI roles to low-risk, ubiquitous operational roles. In this study, terminated senior higher education leaders dedicated to equity work intentionally

transitioned away from explicitly titled and scoped DEI roles to other operational areas. A quick search on LinkedIn demonstrates a shift in nomenclature and naming conventions from DEI (JEDI, D&I, Equity, etc.) to People and Culture, Culture and Community, Talent Management, and Organizational Development. But unlike organizational titles, this current sublimation is from DEI to finance, DEI to operations, DEI to communications. All of the leaders I interviewed are highly skilled and well educated (i.e., PhDs, EdDs, JDs, etc.), with strong professional networks. Contrary to the stereotypic “DEI Hire” narrative (i.e., hiring and advancement due to quotas not merit), many expressed their pursuit of equity-centered roles due to their desire to see their beloved organization become more equitable, not because they were unqualified for other senior roles.

For example, Nanci, who after decades of awarded service was terminated alongside her entire DEI team, expressed the desire for her next role to be free of the DEI moniker. The same institution recently rehired her in a non-DEI, operations management role. She shared that “this role wasn’t like, there was no equity in the title, I just make all my jobs equity. I just decided I’m going to do equity work in them because that is the work from my perspective.” Cathy, who was also dismissed, used her executive skills and people-centered model to launch a consulting practice advising other institutions on the implementation of people-centered organizational development. Over a period of three months, her consulting work catalyzed a full-time senior operations role at another university. Rosie, one of the most senior leaders participating in this study, averred that her job title has never included DEI. She affirmed that she has focused on inclusivity, belonging well before DEI was in vogue:

So my whole life has been centered on making sure that people have environments that allow them to feel as though they have a voice and that they matter. That they’re valued. And so when they come to work, it ought to be a place where you can learn and grow regardless of your race or social identity, where merit is given based on the work you do and not your background or your gender.

In this way, the unscientific use of sublime as noble, majestic, and awe-inspiring may also apply to this movement of equity-focused, cross-silo system leaders, who are working to create fair and equitable organizations, organizations designed for belonging, where discrimination, mistreatment, and disproportionate access to opportunities based on social identity and power are actively managed and mitigated. As far back as the Civil Rights Movement, equity and social justice practitioners have called for (even dreamed of) a form of social systems change where fairness, equity, and in some cases, liberation, were embedded throughout organizations, institutions, and nations. Have the sociopolitical attacks, federal mandates, and organizational responses catalyzed the migration of highly skilled, equity-minded leaders from high-risk, targeted DEI roles into low-risk, ubiquitous operational roles?

Continuing with practices, senior higher education leaders in this study revealed the cultural hacking practices they used to reframe their equity-focused change work while avoiding backlash. While these practices, in and of themselves, are not sublime, they, too, indicate protective approaches. Rosie revealed that “we’re still dealing with institutional pressures. I am still dealing with ways to reframe what we’re doing in order to continue to do the work. I refuse to stop doing the work, because it is needed.” With staff development, leaders highlighted movement from higher-risk, identity-based development practices (e.g., anti-racism training) to lower-risk culturally expansive development practices (e.g., belonging and intergroup dialogue training). While effective DEI training work has always been broad, experiential, sustained, and outcome-driven, this reframing avoids explicit explorations of the intersections of power,

privilege, and social identity. Amaya discussed how internal, anti-DEI faculty and the federal government directed her to revise an entire learning module due to the content potentially being flagged as institutional indoctrination. She also affirmed alterations to data analysis that obfuscate outcomes. She shared that “we’re having to significantly change the way we’re reporting data in order to demonstrate outcomes . . . like you can’t disaggregate along certain dimensions anymore, and so what feels like kind of ridiculous jumping through hoops to try to show who’s benefiting, but without the disaggregation.” In other words, she is no longer allowed to disaggregate by demographics such as race, making it harder to understand group-based outcomes, provide support, or build on successes. In Student Affairs, leaders expressed the need to add disclaimers that all are welcome to attend affinity-based programs and events. While events for historically oppressed groups such as “Lavender Graduation” or “Black Love Night” have never been restricted to one group, the need to add disclaimers underscores the fear of being flagged as discriminatory for failing to include other groups. Leaders in this study were quick to point out the difference between strategic implementation and credence, and their need to “talk the walk” (Pollack et al., 2025). Rosie, who took her cultural celebrations behind closed doors, stated the following:

Because somebody tells me the work I’m doing is illegal, when I know it’s not, that doesn’t mean I’m going to say, okay, I don’t want to do this illegal work anymore. It’s illegal for you to lie and tell me it’s illegal.

With just over one year in office, the Trump administration has now dropped its appeals on EO 14731, ending its formal legal battle to make DEI “unlawful.” While informal attempts continue through reductions in research funding, endowment taxes, Title VII violations, and immigration restrictions, the damage done to DEI work in higher education has been catastrophic. Between and across DCoPs and equity-based organizations, communities of leaders, scholars, and practitioners are questioning the solidity of DEI work itself. Might it be said that the field of DEI in higher education has already begun to vaporize? That DEI, itself, is experiencing sublimation? If so, where does the field go next?

Emiliano’s words quickened when he stated, “I think we have to reflect on how we’ve used language and practices of inclusion to exclude others. And I don’t know that we’ve really reckoned with that, or even started the inside-the-car conversation with this topic, right?” He called for the need for communal self-examination, an exploration of “language and practices and behaviors” that exclude other people as a “real problem we have.” This is an accurate scrutiny of ineffective equity practices that has led to resentment and othering by both excluded and included groups. He shared that “as a person who’s sort of intersecting multiple identities, I had these early experiences around being in queer spaces that felt very white and being in people of color spaces that felt very homophobic and transphobic, right?” He argued that many of those people who felt left out “are now in . . . positions of power and have shut us out.” He lamented that “we really missed it,” a window of opportunity to make real and lasting change:

These institutions, they sort of gassed us up and they gave us divisions and programs and all of these things. And it’s almost like they gave us these things and said, Go over there and play. And we did it, and we weren’t thinking of the bigger picture, and then they just cut us out. I hope that these larger professional associations—NCORE, NASPA, ACPA—don’t just jump into what’s next without some deep reflection on what we have learned from how we’ve been framing and approaching our work.

His views on institutional power surface the actual vulnerability, or insolidity, of DEI work in higher education—that DEI was rarely fully integrated and institutionalized into

organizations of higher learning, and DEI leaders never had real power. Emiliano's contention is that the ongoing sociopolitical attack against DEI has exposed this brittleness. Regardless of the nomenclature moving forward, DEI needs to use this setback as a time for introspection, refinement, realignment, and fomenting of spaces of belonging without othering. It may need to act collectively, as a social force, like DCoPs do, to redevelop standards, practices, structures, and systems that permanently anchor DEI in institutions of higher education.

As senior higher education leaders tasked with implementing equity-focused organizational change move from DEI roles to other operational roles, members of their DCoPs are helping. As a systems thinker, Nanci knew widespread budget cuts would impact the community. In preparation, she created a private group account on a free social media platform and invited all DCoP members to join. Before her dismissal, Nanci was able to develop an alternative leadership structure for the DCoP, transfer ownership of DCoP documentation and resources, and move a majority of the DCoP members—current and former employees—over to the private group account. The account remains active, and DCoP members use it to communicate, share job listings, and help each other land new opportunities. Essentially, the DCoP is actively contributing to the process of sublimation, making it, in effect, more difficult for Federal and state agencies to target equity-focused leaders.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

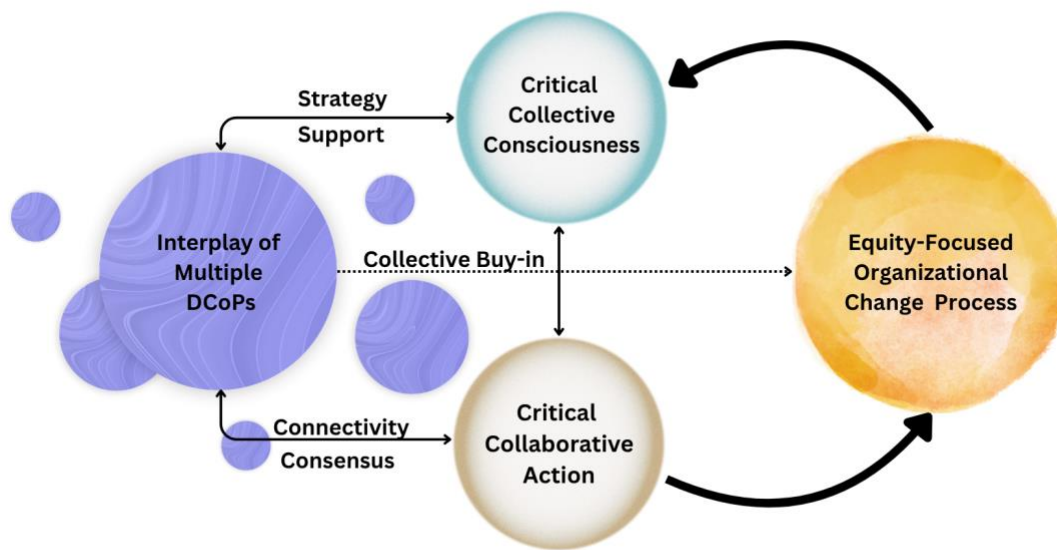
Discussion

This study sheds light on the research question: How does senior higher education leaders' participation in DCoPs inform and influence their perspectives and practices in ways that advance equity-focused organizational change? When exploring the potential of DCoPs, I merely hint at the immense “power of community” to provide leaders with information and knowledge, guidance, and support, while building social cohesion, and shaping organizations. The findings elucidate the research question and the literature in several ways.

First, participation across multiple DCoPs developed and enhanced senior higher education leaders' critical consciousness and systems thinking in this study. It provided a holistic experience where senior leaders developed their practices and identities through processes such as mentorship, experiential learning, and identity-construction. Each DCoP provided benefits to each leader in distinct ways. Effective internal DCoPs provided collective intelligence, connectivity, and collaborative action, while external DCoPs offered a supportive peer network, intraorganizational information and readiness, and a learning ground. All leaders in this study identified as having at least one marginalized identity. Participation in multiple DCoPs helped these marginalized leaders find peer support for their mental health and well-being in targeted roles within high-stress environments. In these spaces, leaders navigated and reified their social identities, including the sometimes contrasting identities of “senior leader” and “marginalized person,” while leveraging the community to enact change. This first finding conforms with the literature on CoP participation, where “individuals may participate in loose ‘networks of practice’ across organizational boundaries. It is through and in relation to these communities and networks that individuals develop their identities and practices through processes such as role modeling, experimentation and identity-construction” (Handley et al., 2006, p. 647). It also agrees with one of the study's theoretical lenses, SCT, where “behavior, cognitive, and other personal factors and environmental events operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 361) and the literature on the development of DEI leaders (Casciaro et al., 2019; Leon, 2014). Participation in multiple DCoPs while addressing anti-DEI policies allowed leaders in this study to cultivate “beliefs in their capabilities so that they will use their talents effectively” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 362). In other words, the DCoPs and challenges in the environment allowed these marginalized senior leaders to reflect and act—praxis (Freire, 1970)—on their own leadership while implementing change. Figure 2 visualizes how participation in multiple DCoPs informs and influences the perspectives and practices of senior higher education leaders, specifically, their implementation of equity-focused organizational change.

Figure 2

Iterative Cycle of DCoP-Influenced Organizational Change (Soriano-Bilal, 2026, pp. 70–71)



In alignment with the literature on systems thinking (Meadows, 2009; Senge et al., 2012; Thinking Tools Studio, n.d.-b), participation across multiple DCoPs assisted leaders in slowing down, engaging in deeper reflection, shifting mental models, and seeing the system. While Emiliano was the only informant to name his strategy Systems Thinking, all leaders in this study implemented their equity-focused organizational change initiatives in concert with a Liberatory Design process—notice/reflect, see the system, empathize, define, inquire, imagine, prototype, and repeat (National Equity Project, n.d.). Liberatory Design is a subset of systems thinking, and all participants consistently utilized two liberatory design principles, Liberatory Collaboration and Consensus by Design.

In terms of perspective-taking, participation in multiple DCoPs also provided senior higher education leaders with micro (community mental health), meso (intraorganizational), and macro-level awareness (cross-institutional responses to federal anti-DEI policy; Haveman, 2022). Effective DCoPs encouraged leaders in this study to engage in collective deliberation and perspective-taking (Casciaro et al., 2019; Leon, 2014), which helped flatten organizational hierarchies and reinforced systems thinking approaches (Holcombe et al., 2023b; Kelley et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2018; Stroh, 2015).

Second, leaders in this study cited properly managed DCoPs as vehicles for improving the flow of information and knowledge (Meadows, 2009; Senge et al., 2012), which, in turn, facilitated social cohesion and cross-silo and cross-institutional dialogue (Casciaro et al., 2019) and offered them value collective intelligence (Malone, 2019) that significantly influenced their equity-focused organizational change efforts. In fact, this collective intelligence allowed leaders in this study to act as “learning conveners” (Pyrko et al., 2019, p. 483), “cultural brokers” (Casciaro et al., 2019, p. 133) or systems change agents—bridges between theory and practice, between systems change theory and educational practice (Crow et al., 2019). Through this frame, senior higher education leaders, such as Rosie, Nanci, and Emiliano, are systems change agents who utilized community-based mechanisms such as DCoPs as distributive platforms for scalable

educational development—for effective change. That said, DCoPs are a relatively recent manifestation; more in-depth research is needed to understand DCoPs better as system leverage points (i.e., as learning environments, retention tools, knowledge centers, cross-silo infrastructure, non-bottleneck resources, skunkworks) and how senior higher education leaders might utilize them to navigate sociopolitical threats while advancing equity-focused organizational change. How might a formalization of this bridging role impact the DEI field and organizations in general?

All leaders in this study described their organization as siloed and decentralized, highlighting their internal DCoPs as critical platforms for connectivity and real-time feedback on organizational issues (Gold et al., 2026; Kelley et al., 2020b; Margherio et al., 2023; Waariyo et al., 2025). In terms of other practices, all participants named external DCoPs as a supportive peer network and a learning ground where they could collectively test systems-based problem-solving in a safer environment without fear of failing. Interestingly, external DCoPs allowed senior leaders in this study an opportunity to practice being “senior leaders” without organizational consequences. Additionally, within these external, national DCoPs, participants found peer leaders from other organizations who served as support systems and key advisors. These external collective hubs encouraged senior leaders to hone their strategy and systems approach by sharing and receiving tacit knowledge, feedback, and resources with peers responsible for similar equity-focused organizational change initiatives. In other words, external, national DCoPs have the potential to be more influential and narrower, moving from a community of practice to a community of compeers. The current literature does not adequately address external, national DCoPs, specifically their importance for senior higher education leaders navigating the current anti-DEI backlash.

In terms of advancing equity-focusing organizational change, participation in multiple DCoPs helped leaders in this study develop strategic capabilities. Leaders cited evidence-based practices for advancing equity-based organizational change in concert with the literature. Practices such as mentorship, cross-silo placement (i.e., stretch opportunities into other areas), information and knowledge sharing, and collective advocacy (Casciaro, 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Leon, 2014) were all mentioned as organizationally beneficial by-products of DCoPs. Even so, higher education’s structural resistance to change means that equity-focused organizational change initiatives (DEI) and network-based innovation mechanisms (DCoPs) may be decoupled from actual institutional priorities (Kezar, 2023). By leveraging multiple DCoPs, leaders in this study were able to provide community-based mechanisms for educational development (Crow et al., 2019), reduce communal anxiety (Burnes, 2019) by improving the flow of information and knowledge, and pursue systemic approaches—collaborative, incremental “small wins” (Correll, 2017)—to navigate the intractable nature of change in higher education (Kezar, 2023) and “finesse” (Pollack et al., 2025, p. 5) anti-DEI policy. Leaders accomplished all of this while sustaining a commitment to DEI values. On the surface, incremental change, or small wins and strategic finesse, might all seem counterintuitive, but a large body of research on organizational change supports the incremental approach that Nanci, Emiliano, Mateo, Isabella, Rosie, and other leaders followed in this study (Correll, 2017; Kezar, 2023; Weick & Quinn, 1994) and the uniquely difficult challenge of organizational change in higher education (Bensimon, 2004; Kezar, 2023), where structural forces such as distributed leadership, decentralization, and academic freedom maintain an environment of privileged seclusion. Another example is Rosie, who used tactical finesse to continue her DEI work, shifting her cultural programming from in-person to Zoom. This confirms with recent literature

in which researchers found higher education leadership responds to anti-DEI legislation in three ways: Fight, “staying the course with minimal adjustment” (Pollack et al., 2025, p. 5), Flight, “withdrawing considerably or fully abandoning previously established DEI programs” (p. 5), or Finesse, “sustaining commitment to the underlying values of diversity, equity, and inclusion while shifting strategy and execution” (p. 5). In this way, supra-individual system thinking approaches—collaborative, incremental, systemic—are finessed to become more than functional; they may contribute to the well-being and institutional longevity of marginalized senior higher education leaders, students, and faculty. They may save lives.

Leaders in this study, who modulated their own power in communal spaces, warned of the pitfalls and risks inherent in DCoPs, such as groupthink, broken trust, and the replication of harmful cultural practices regarding social identity and power. For example, Nanci lamented on how the broken trust of one key DCoP member corrupted the community for everyone else. Her sentiments align with research on organizational trust, where “strategies for achieving DEI in a high-trust organization almost completely diverge from strategies needed to achieve DEI in a low-trust environment” (Zheng, 2023, p. 205). Darryl believed the greatest threat to a DCoP is groupthink, while Mateo and Isabella pointed to bottlenecks in the flow of information and resistance to collaboration and collective processes. That said, Nanci, Rosie, Emiliano, Mateo, and Isabella all repeatedly attributed their organizational successes to DCoPs, which assisted them in slowing down, engaging in deeper reflection, shifting mental models, and seeing systems.

As sociopolitical uncertainty increased, participants in this study used their unique talents, education, and skills to pursue non-DEI roles, while maintaining their permanent equity lens. Probably the most significant insight from this study is the sublimation of senior higher education leaders away from high-risk DEI roles to ubiquitous operational roles, usually with the assistance of DCoP members and networks. While it may be convenient to attribute this movement to safety, leaders in this study have expressed high risk tolerance and resilience as keys to their success in navigating DEI-related roles before and during the current backlash. For example, when dealing with current sociopolitical issues, Rosie stated, “But now I push hard. I’m still diplomatic, but there is no fear, because I’ve prepared myself, over the years, to walk at any moment if I’m pushed to do something against my principles.” At this point, it is impossible to know the cause of this movement. The leaders in this study who have lost their jobs indicated a desire to secure new roles devoid of the DEI moniker. What does this mean for the DEI field? What does it mean for campus members, such as students, who benefit from formal DEI leadership?

The effect of this sublimation can also be observed in the negative space left by the dismissal of DEI leaders and its impact on marginalized students. There have been significant increases in Black, Latinx, and Native American groups as colleges and universities shutter DEI offices and cultural centers. Findings from a recent study “provide some evidence that students are continuing to organize diverse spaces despite (or even because of) recent anti-DEI legislation” (Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025, p. 10). Historically underrepresented students in colleges and universities without DEI offices and cultural centers, in states with strong anti-DEI laws and policies (and historic educational barriers for Black, Latine, and Indigenous students), may join together as a protective social force. With the loss of DEI offices and cultural centers, these students not only lose resources and safer spaces but may also lose key staff, that is, culturally responsive campus leaders who mentor, advise, counsel, support, and employ Black, Latinx, and Native American students. Research on the concept of servingness demonstrates how

key staff working with Black, Latine, and Indigenous students improve attrition and academic outcomes (Garcia et al., 2019).

Other researchers need to investigate this sublimation phenomenon and its impact on campus culture because it may signal more than a shift in job duties and nomenclature. Perhaps it is a structural change in what is and is not DEI or equity-related leadership. How might the movement of these leaders, this expansion into other areas of the organization, thwart future attacks on equity-centered work and workers?

In totality, the findings on multiple DCoPs, information and knowledge sharing, systems thinking, and sublimation all overlap, providing a “landscape of practice” where senior leaders depend on collaboration, collective knowledge, and decision-making rather than relying exclusively on their own knowledge and local practices to implement equity-focused organizational change.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are several, including the small sample size; the use of a singular, private institution, in the same geographic location, instead of many, varying institutions across the country; the focus on senior administrative leadership, not other campus workers; and the impact of the anti-DEI climate on recruitment, participation, transparency, and time. For this case study, I recruited 15 senior higher education leaders from the same middle-sized private institution in California via email. Ten of the 15 leaders agreed to participate in the study, but only eight agreed to discuss their current change work candidly. Due to federal, state, and organizational anti-DEI actions, some of the leaders I recruited were released from their positions, others decided it would not be prudent to participate, and one agreed to be interviewed with the condition they not share anything about their current role. While I could have investigated other administrative or academic job levels, I focused my research design on senior administrative leaders due to their outsized role in influencing and advancing equity-focused change initiatives. My last limitation, and potentially a limitation for any study, was time. As a full-time employee and a graduate student studying a rapidly evolving phenomenon, I had to plan carefully to schedule an hour’s worth of time with overburdened leaders. During the study, two of the eight participants—Nanci and Cathy—were terminated from their positions. While limitations exist in every qualitative study, each of the eight participants engaged fully, contributing distinct and important information to the research.

Implications

The findings suggest that participation in DCoPs is important to the development of senior higher education leaders, their strategic approaches, and the advancement of their organizational change initiatives. The results of these research findings align with the current literature on DEI, CoPs, and OCM. For senior leaders in this study, properly facilitated DCoPs combine the benefits of DEI and CoPs—capacity building (Clark et al., 2021; Hong & Page, 2004; Wenger, 2010); information and knowledge sharing (Leon, 2014; Malone, 2019); and the intentional mitigation of social identity and power dynamics (Ahmed, 2012; Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020; Leon, 2014), while institutionalizing DEI principles and practices across silos (Kezar, 2023; Leon, 2014). Poorly facilitated DCoPs may reproduce the risks inherent in DEI and CoPs, including propagation of harmful cultural practices around social identity and power (e.g., domination, blame, shame, gatekeeping, othering; Handley et al., 2006; Powell & Menendian, 2024); replication and distribution of imprecise knowledge and information (i.e., exchange of intellectual property, personnel information, institutional documentation); and threats to organizational processes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Zheng, 2022). In lieu of the associated risk

regarding DCoPs, all senior leaders in this study noted their reliance on DCoPs as a strategic component of their equity-focused organizational change initiatives. Because the senior higher education leaders in this study self-identify as members of marginalized ethno-racial groups, are collective, collaborative approaches such as DCoPs a preferential strategy or tactic for marginalized leaders? How might dominant-culture senior higher education leaders use DCoPs or networks to enact change?

While there are a number of gaps in the DEI research, including the usage of collective intelligence (Malone, 2019; Valentine & Hinds, 2022); synergies between DEI and OCM modalities (Zheng, 2022); and ideation on the next wave (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020) of equity-based work, the findings add more texture, such as the importance of DCoP-based peer support, which leaders noted as critical to their health and well-being during times of increased sociopolitical pressure, and the sublimation of senior leaders from targeted DEI-roles to ubiquitous operational roles. Nanci and Cathy were both terminated from their DEI roles only to find new senior operational roles.

While the small sample size of this case study only allows us to observe patterns in perspective, participation, and implementation, not outcomes, it sparks curiosity around broader implications. How might location, organizational culture, school and unit dynamics, demographics, psychographics, positionality, and resource proximity alter the data? Even though the U.S. Department of Education has dropped its formal legal appeal to strip federal funding from schools and colleges promoting DEI (Blake, 2026), substantive damage has already been done:

- Seminal DEI events such as the National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE) have been paused by their institutions.
- DCoPs and DEI-related networks are shuttering due to a shift in institutional priorities, defunding, and staffing shortages (Harper, 2025; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025)
- Loss of DEI-related offices, programs, cultural centers, and personnel (Harper, 2025; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, de facto anti-DEI (anti-equity) policymaking and attacks at the federal, state, and state-level continue (e.g., immigration enforcement, gender-affirming care, racial profiling, cuts to affordable housing). To the dismay of equity-minded campus community members, many universities that championed DEI in 2020, dismantled it in 2025, creating a programmatic and operational void for students, staff, and faculty members invested in the work, and leaving senior higher education leaders responsible for advancing the work wondering if their beloved institutions ever cared about equity-focused change in the first place. Did their institutions care about them?

These implications point to something deeper, higher education's complicated relationship with hierarchy, power, and prestige on one hand— where the inequitable positionality of faculty is permanently fixed higher than staff and students, and economic survival on the other— where institutions are shuttering across the country, demographics show a marked decrease in the number of college-age students, and the tuition-based business model is broken. In other words, in addition to the difficulty of organizational change in higher education, positional inequity and the pitfalls of capitalism injure these institutions in fundamental, foundational ways. In fact, the biggest implication may be the endemic structure of the American higher education system.

Future Research

Regardless of federal and state regulations, equity-centered organizational change will persist; groups of community members will continue to convene, sharing tacit knowledge, information, and support toward the improvement of their skills, their well-being, and the betterment of their organizations. The future of equity-centered organizational change depends on the orchestrated interplay of critical collective consciousness and critical collaborative action, a manifestation of praxis (Freire, 1970), where DCoPs serve as hub and sandbox for innovation and creative placemaking. From this perspective, senior higher education leaders become conductors, guiding the community as the community guides them. This virtuous and iterative cycle of supra-individualistic thinking and acting, which adheres to systems design principles, sits at the heart of organizational development. The findings from this study demonstrate this praxis: senior higher education leaders move between multiple DCoPs, testing, learning across levels (micro, meso, and macro), and receiving peer support, while acting on information such as time delays to fortify their institution. They share and receive tacit information from across the university, building social cohesion and social capital while leveraging collective intelligence toward change initiatives. Senior higher education leaders ground their cross-silo leadership in systems thinking approaches, slowing down, building consensus by design, implementing strategic actions that increase agency, and reducing resistance to the organizational change efforts. Last, contemporary DEI work has evolved through four waves (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020), with senior higher education leaders perhaps signaling the next wave of equity work through their adaptation to the current sociopolitical landscape by moving from targeted, high-risk DEI roles (solid) to low-risk, ubiquitous operational roles (gas). How might this study catalyze additional research exploring the “power of community” to advance the work of leaders conducting equity-focused organizational change during times of major sociopolitical upheaval and resistance?

How will the practice and implementation of DEI in higher education evolve or devolve in this new paradigm? Future researchers might explore these factors and build on the foundation laid by this study by examining how senior higher education leaders navigate the abrupt and potentially devastating impact of federal, state, and regional legislation on equity-focused organizational change. More research also needs to be done on the importance of external, national DCoPs, which provided peer support to leaders in this study and was critical to their mental health and well-being during times of increased sociopolitical pressure, and the career-based sublimation of the DEI leaders. Investigating the use of DCoPs by leaders across multiple higher educational institutions, locations, institutional types (e.g., private, public, parochial, etc.), and sizes could also be meaningful. Additionally, future researchers might explore how job levels or job security affect equity-focused change initiatives, especially for marginalized, minoritized leaders. Organizations view both DEI and CoPs as vehicles for “developing strategic capabilities” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022, p. 18; Zheng, 2022), not as practices for paradigmatic shifts (King et al., 2023; Lesser & Storck, 2001; Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023). With the loss of DEI leadership in higher education, how might DCoPs act as surrogates for the leadership void, providing the creative placemaking needed to support students and advance equity-focused organizational change? Because DCoPs are a relatively recent manifestation, more in-depth research is also needed to better understand DCoPs as system leverage points (i.e., as learning environments, creative placemaking hubs, retention tools, knowledge centers, cross-silo infrastructure, non-bottleneck resources, skunkworks), and how senior higher education leaders might utilize them to move through the ebbs and flows of sociopolitical change while continuing to advance equity-focused organizational change.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a glimpse into the future of DEI and equity-centered change work in higher education. They illuminate the potential effect of DCoPs on senior higher education leaders tasked with navigating the next wave of DEI while implementing equity-focused change. The insights that emerge are several: senior higher education leaders participate in multiple DCoPs, finding support, leadership development, and insight across and between internal and external DCoPs (multiple DCoPs); tacit knowledge and information sharing within and across DCoPs present benefits such as collective intelligence and social capital, and risks such as distrust and groupthink (Information Sharing); the collective and collaborative constitution of DCoPs inspire leaders to approach change through a systems perspective, with micro, meso, and macro-level awareness (Systems Change Agents); and DCoP members encourage and assist leaders in their strategic movement from DEI roles to operational roles (Sublime). Senior leaders in this study engaged with DCoPs as collective hubs for honing strategy, devising solutions, receiving support, and implementing change. The research on DEI, CoPs, and OCM is expanding and evolving. As more organizations utilize them, the need to define them better will increase. Advances in educational development, systems thinking, and improvement science will contribute to the growing research on DCoPs and OCM as scholars and organizations refine practices to improve equity-based outcomes.

As attacks on DEI intensify, the pressure on senior higher education leaders tasked with equity-focused organizational change to show results will only increase. These leaders will be responsible for successfully navigating sociopolitical obstacles while demonstrating measurable outcomes on organizational equity. The changing of these leaders (internally and externally) and the DCoPs they inhabit are integral parts of the entire organizational change effort. “The long view of literacies for leadership and inclusion is that even when battles are lost, they can constitute blows to the body politic that eventually weaken resistance and pave the way for productive change” (Mahiri, 2021). While DEI will change and evolve, social justice (fairness, equity, and liberation) and belonging are everlasting productions of the human spirit.

The gaps in the DEI research include the usage of collective intelligence (DCoPs), where DCoPs may operate as a “supermind” to improve decision-making and problem-solving (Malone, 2019; Valentine & Hinds, 2022); synergies between DEI and OCM modalities (ADKAR, improvement science, system thinking); and ideation on the next wave (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020) of equity-based work, which might include systems-based approaches such as liberatory design (Anaissie et al., 2021), “which meshes human-centered design (aka design thinking) with complex systems theory, and deep equity practice” (National Equity Project, n.d.) and targeted universalism, which calls for “setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals” (Powell et al., 2019, p. 5), and evidence-based universal approaches to DEI training such as intergroup dialogue (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018) and empathic mindset intervention (Okonofua, 2016), which deemphasize social identity and bias while creating sense of belonging without othering (Powell et al., 2019). If substantive, transformational DEI change is incremental, innovative, and sensitive to the ebbs and flows of sociopolitical events such as George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Presidential Executive Order 14173, how might equity-focused senior higher education leaders design resilient organizational change initiatives that produce less “happy talk” (Gibbs et al., 2023, p. 42) and more equitable outcomes?

Casciaro et al. (2019) and Edmondson (2021) called these systems-minded, collaborative leaders *cross-silo leaders* who “bring employees from diverse groups together on initiatives . . .

give people across silos a chance to identify various kinds of expertise within their organization, map how they're connected or disconnected, and see how the internal knowledge network can be linked to enable valuable collaboration" (Casciaro et al., 2019, p. 138). DCoPs are a "knowledge network" (Casciaro et al., 2019, p. 138), a supermind (Malone, 2019, p. 34), and a form of "shared leadership" (Kezar, 2023b, p. 2) that equity-minded, cross-silo leaders may employ to reduce happy talk, build capacity, and catalyze organizational change.

This study demonstrates higher education institutions' strong desire to embed CoPs and DEI in their organizational structure without a strong mandate for substantive organizational change (Stokas, 2023). Organizations view both CoPs and DEI as vehicles for "developing strategic capabilities" (Wenger-Trayner, E. et al., 2022, p. 18), not as practices for paradigmatic shifts (Oliha-Donaldson, 2020; Stokas, 2023). Participants recounted how they approached organizational change with tactical awareness of their identities, positionality, and the need to build consensus. This study informs the practice of senior higher education leaders by providing a framework for integrating DCoPs into their equity-focused organizational change workflow. If properly structured and managed, this framework enables a collective, collaborative process for the advancement of institutional fairness and equity.

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