

On Shared Equity Leadership Series

Shared Equity Leadership in Politically Restrictive Environments



A Practice Brief

USC Rossier
*Pullias Center for
Higher Education*

Shared Equity Leadership in Politically Restrictive Environments

By Jordan Harper, Elizabeth Holcombe and Adrianna Kezar

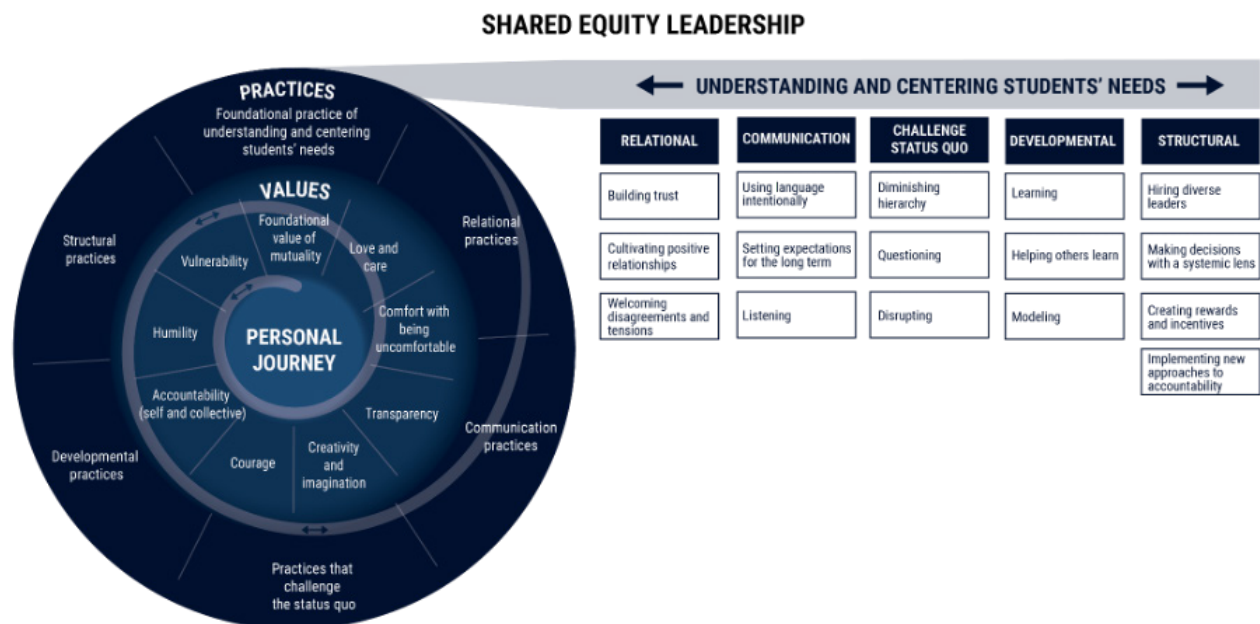
We find ourselves at a critical juncture as states across the nation enact anti-diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) legislation, and the Trump administration in its earliest days has attempted to shut down DEI initiatives across the federal government and other sectors, including higher education. Campuses within jurisdictions that have not yet passed such laws are preparing for what appears to be an impending reality. [Since 2023](#), 134 bills restricting higher institutions' efforts to advance DEI have been introduced in state legislatures; at the time of this writing and publication, 15 of these bills have become laws in 16 states. Restrictions in these laws include banning DEI-designated offices or staff, mandatory DEI training, diversity statements, and consideration of race in hiring. At the same time, a series of executive orders and Dear Colleague letters from the Trump administration, along with massive cuts to federal funding to education and research, threaten DEI-related efforts from the federal level. The stakes and implications are incredibly high for college and university leaders as external pressures intensify. We have already seen evidence of campuses preemptively straying from their core missions and jeopardizing their support for historically-marginalized groups as well as their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion.

How can we sustain our work and affirm our commitment to equity during these challenging times? Our research shows that a **Shared Equity Leadership (SEL)** approach has great potential for navigating Restrictive Political and Legal Environments (RPLEs). SEL is a collaborative approach to equity work in which responsibility is distributed and embedded across campus rather than concentrated in a single role or office. While our original research on SEL was conducted prior to the current anti-DEI backlash, our more recent work has examined SEL's potential use in RPLEs. This practice brief highlights some of the ways that SEL can support leaders in continuing to pursue their equity goals in today's challenging environment.

What Is SEL and Why Is It Useful in RPLEs?

In SEL environments, responsibility for equity work is shared broadly across campus. Leaders in all functional areas — faculty, student affairs, operations and business and more — work collaboratively to embed equity throughout their roles and offices. This approach is really about changing the culture of a campus so that leaders are all operating with an equity lens and considering the equity impacts of their work. Doing the work in this way deemphasizes the significance of a single DEI leader or office. Though many campuses may choose to retain such leaders or offices, simply having

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one or a few people in charge of DEI on campus will not drive the type of systemic culture change necessary to make our campuses places where all students — including and especially those from historically-marginalized backgrounds — can succeed. This type of change requires both individual and organizational transformation, and our research shows that SEL supports both types of transformation.

The SEL model is characterized by three main components: the **personal journey toward critical consciousness**, in which individuals develop a personal commitment to the work and to continuous learning and growth; **values** that shape how people show up to the work and guide decision-making and action; and **practices** that help leaders operate in new ways that center equity.

The **personal journey** involves leaders considering their own identities and experiences and how those have shaped their engagement with the work, as well as an understanding of the systemic and structural nature of various inequities. Everyone on campus will not be at the same place on their personal journey — some may still be at the very beginning — but a critical mass of people on campus should be engaged and committed to this work. The **values** that animate shared equity leadership — *vulnerability, love and care, comfort with being uncomfortable, transparency, creativity and innovation, courage, self-accountability, and humility* — help guide leaders through the process of doing the work and shape the ways that decisions are made and actions are taken. The SEL **practices** are the moves that leaders make to enact their values and create new ways of working. The foundational practice of understanding and centering students' needs and the five categories of related practices — *relational practices, developmental practices, communication practices, practices that challenge the status quo, and structural practices* — are enacted both individually

and collectively and change the way that things get done on campus. In SEL environments, leaders across campus take responsibility for their growth on their personal journey and they work collectively to center their values and enact new practices to help transform their institutions. Campuses that used this approach were able to make significant progress on their equity goals, including closing equity gaps, diversifying their faculty, or improving their campus climate. For more details about SEL, please see [our earlier reports](#).

While our original research on SEL was conducted from 2019-2021, preceding the intensity of the current anti-DEI backlash, our more recent work indicates that SEL is actually a promising approach in today's restrictive political and legal environments, requiring only a few minor adjustments to the model to account for restrictive environments. Because SEL distributes responsibility for equity work across campus rather than concentrating it in a single role or office, it is more difficult for political opponents to target and eliminate the work. Embedding equity-oriented values into daily practice will help improve experiences and outcomes for students, faculty and staff from historically-marginalized backgrounds and create campus environments where all stakeholders are flourishing.

Leaning into SEL can support the continuation of important diversity, equity and inclusion work. Our research indicates that certain values and practices may be especially important to lean on in these challenging times. In terms of **values**, *creativity and innovation* (to safeguard the work and any progress) and *courage* (to continue the work in the face of opposition) are particularly important in RPLEs that have stripped funding related to DEI or dismantled offices and positions. Additionally, *love and care* for students and colleagues can often be the impetus to continue the work in the face of threats and opposition. Most of the SEL **values** (i.e., *humility, transparency, and comfort with being uncomfortable*) are aligned with culture change and shared leadership more broadly, meaning that they are not exclusive to DEI-related activities or organizational change and, thus, are less likely to be targeted.

In terms of **practices**, *relational practices* and *communication practices* will be particularly important as campus leaders continue to pursue their equity goals in this fraught environment. *Relational practices* include *building trust, cultivating positive relationships, and welcoming disagreements and tensions*, all of which take on crucial importance as campus stakeholders navigate the legalities and external pressures surrounding DEI work. Leaders may have different comfort levels in discussing new legal and political realities and designing their work around or despite them. They may show up differently depending on whether their jobs or part of their job responsibilities can be targeted or upended. Ensuring that leaders can continue to work together despite disagreements, building on a foundation of trust, and maintaining positive relationships are essential in this context.

Communication practices were actually the set of practices emphasized the most by leaders we interviewed in RPLEs, especially the practice of *using language intentionally*. Campuses in RPLEs often must alter the language they use related to DEI in what is communicated publicly since certain words are censored and can be flagged by lawmakers and political opponents. Leaders were reframing “historically-marginalized populations” away from only including racially-minoritized people, for example. Some campuses discussed switching to language around opportunity, fairness, inclusive excellence, belonging or other language perceived as less likely to run afoul of state legislation or draw the ire of political opponents. Leaders also described the importance of back-channel communication options (i.e., communication away from institutional emails, more in-person meetings as opposed to Zoom, smaller one-on-one meetings instead of larger groups) since surveillance is often heightened in RPLEs.

What Adjustments Should Be Made to SEL in Restrictive Environments?

There are a few aspects of the SEL model that may require some rethinking in RPLEs — in particular, *practices that challenge the status quo* and *structural practices*. Leaders described difficulties with *practices that challenge the status quo*, but more in the sense of how they were framing or communicating those practices rather than whether they could actually enact them. The environment of fear and uncertainty around DEI work in higher education has made many leaders wary of calling out inequities publicly and doing the sort of *questioning and disrupting* that is so important to this work. Participants in our study noted several potential creative ways to reframe their language around these practices, including by tying them to the concept of innovation or linking them to the campus’s mission or organizational identity.

The *structural practices* are most at risk in RPLEs, in particular *creating rewards and incentives*, *hiring diverse leaders*, and *implementing new approaches to accountability*. These structural practices can be easily located by lawmakers and political opponents, which places them under explicit threat. The result is that these structural practices related to rewards and resources must be carefully implemented or, unfortunately, nullified. In these instances, shielding or eliminating some of these resources and rewards is understood as a temporary necessity to preserve equity work; the hope is always to bring these resources and rewards back into the fold at another point in time. In the interim, however, campuses must utilize the value of *creativity and innovation* to think about alternative structures to support the work that may be less easy to locate and target.

Additionally, while we have observed SEL implemented successfully both with and without formal DEI positions or offices as a part of its organizational structure, in RPLEs it may not be possible to retain these offices and positions. In our report on [organizing SEL](#), we describe two approaches that may

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work better for structuring the work in RPLEs. First is the Bridging Model, an approach that is jointly led by senior leaders, a permanent council of ground-level leaders (i.e., faculty, staff and students) meant to help the institution realize its long-term equity goals, and a “bridge” person who translates between senior leadership and ground-level leaders. And second is the Woven Model, which structures DEI work into people’s existing roles, responsibilities, and processes instead of formal positions or offices. Coordinating groups or councils help connect the work across campus and provide centralized oversight in the absence of formal positions and offices. These two models can continue without a DEI office or a CDO while retaining the core elements that make SEL effective.

Finally, in this moment leaders must look beyond their campus boundaries and utilize collaborative networks to continue supporting historically-marginalized communities. These collaborative networks can also exist as coalitions among like-minded individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions, locally and nationally, during this challenging time. National nonprofit organizations and professional associations — such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), and the American Council on Education (ACE) — have the potential to be especially valuable given their ability to harness the power of their collective membership. Many of these organizations have advocacy arms and offer resources like reports or guides to help navigate current challenges. Some even engage in legal actions to contest the constitutionality of anti-DEI legislation. These collaborative networks have the potential to offer material support and emotional care and build collective power to thwart attacks and continue the work.

Key Takeaways

- Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) is an effective model for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and commitments, even in politically restrictive environments. This model is collaborative in nature and distributes responsibilities across the campus, integrating support for students from historically marginalized backgrounds into the work of all educators.
- The core elements and essence of the SEL model — the personal journey work, values, and most practices—are an effective way to continue the work and are not explicitly open to targeting and dismantling.
- Certain practices, such as practices that challenge the status quo and structural practices (e.g., rewards and incentives for doing DEI work), are somewhat more challenging to implement, as they are likely to draw the attention of anti-DEI proponents. Leaders may need to adjust and consider alternative structures to support equity work that are less easy to locate and target.

Reflective Questions

1. How does our campus's mission or strategic vision require us to pursue diversity, equity and/or inclusion? What sorts of legal, political or cultural barriers to enacting these parts of our mission or strategic vision do we currently face?
2. To what extent are we currently sharing responsibility for DEI leadership on our campus? How can we lean into the value of creativity and innovation to think about distributing the work more broadly, even as we face restrictions and limitations?
3. What are campus stakeholders' thoughts on changing language around DEI? How are we communicating any changes that we are making in ways that affirm our continuing commitment to our goals and mission?
4. Are we able to continue or implement any structural practices (creating rewards and incentives, hiring diverse leaders, and implementing new approaches to accountability) to help us advance our DEI goals? If not, what other strategies might we call upon to help us embed equity into organizational structures?
5. Are we attempting to continue this work in isolation? Who are we building a network with outside of our campus? How might we go about doing this to both advance and preserve DEI-related progress?