Considerations and challenges of implementing shared equity leadership

Executive summary

College and university campuses need new and creative strategies for continuing to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals amidst today's challenging cultural and political landscape. One such strategy is shared equity leadership (SEL), which broadly distributes responsibility for DEI work into people's roles across campus rather than concentrating it in a single office. SEL is predicated on the idea that accomplishing DEI goals requires a collaborative and relational approach. While this approach has had success at campuses across the country, leaders faced challenges to implementation that haven't been previously explored.

This report features secondary analysis of our original SEL data, collected from eight institutions across the country in 2020–2021, looking specifically at common challenges faced by leaders in our study and strategies for navigating these challenges. We found two distinct sets of challenges. First, we noted a set of challenges that were common across most campuses but ultimately navigable. These included challenges transitioning to shared leadership approaches, difficulties navigating accountability, unevenness in leaders' personal journeys, inconsistency in different departments or units across the organization, and working together across differences in power and privilege. Our data suggest several strategies campus leaders used to successfully navigate these challenges. We also found a second set of challenges that had the potential to derail SEL efforts if not carefully and intentionally addressed. These challenges included poor relationships and lack of trust, lack of senior leadership support, and a hostile state political climate. Our data suggest some strategies for navigating these challenges, and our ongoing work with practitioners and campus leaders also informed some of our recommendations for navigating these roadblocks.

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Introduction

The current political and cultural climate in the United States make diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education more challenging. In many states, funding for DEI positions and offices has been cut and discussion of critical race theory (CRT) and other DEI content has been banned from classrooms (DEI Legislation Tracker, 2024). At the federal level, the Supreme Court's decision ending race-based affirmative action has many campuses scrambling to revamp their recruitment and admissions policies and reevaluate race-based scholarships, services and programs. College and university leaders find themselves walking a narrow tightrope. They must avoid violating state or federal laws or incurring the wrath of ideologically driven politicians or anti-DEI activists, while still working to ensure their campuses are places where students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and low-income students can thrive despite systems and structures that were not created for them. Creative approaches to DEI leadership are needed to navigate this dispiriting environment and continue the necessary work of dismantling inequitable systems and structures that privilege a declining group of mostly White, male, cisgender and heterosexual students.

One such creative approach is shared equity leadership (SEL), which combines individual and institutional transformation and includes many more people in the work of leadership for equity, instead of narrowly focusing on DEI-centered personnel or offices. SEL is predicated on the idea that effective DEI leadership requires a collaborative approach rather than one that is siloed or isolated to a single leader or office. SEL sits at the intersection of theories of equity-minded leadership (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) and shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Equity-minded leadership advances equity by using evidence, foregrounding race and focusing on institutions and systems when making change (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). *Shared leadership* includes multiple stakeholders at varying levels of the organization collaborating to set goals and make decisions (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). However, *shared equity leadership* describes a collaborative approach to equity leadership that reflects an embodiment of equity, including a commitment to new values and practices and a personal journey toward critical consciousness (Kezar et al, 2021). Leaders engaged in this work must interrogate their own experiences and identities to understand their place in the work, and collectively they embody a new set of values and enact new practices to create meaningful and lasting change on campus. Our earlier research on SEL indicated that this approach can be effective across many different institutional contexts and can take several different organizational forms tailored to fit institutional cultures

and characteristics (Kezar et al., 2021a; Holcombe et al., 2022a). We also explored several other topics related to SEL, including accountability, capacity-building, embedding the work in different roles, and the emotional labor involved in doing this work (Kezar et al., 2022; Holcombe et al., 2022a; Holcombe et al., 2022b; Vigil et al., 2023).

However, we haven't yet explored some of the challenges and considerations for implementing SEL. It's natural, if not inevitable, when transitioning from more hierarchical models to more shared approaches to DEI leadership that leaders will face challenges in the process. In this report, we share some common challenges so leaders interested in applying this approach on their own campuses can be prepared for potential stumbling blocks. We also share recommendations for how to navigate these challenges.

This report features secondary analysis of our original SEL data, collected from eight institutions across the country, looking specifically at common challenges faced by leaders in our study and strategies for navigating these challenges.[1] Our original SEL data was collected in 2020–2021, at a time when support for racial justice and antiracist efforts along with other social justice movements coalesced in higher education and across U.S. society more broadly. However, our ongoing engagement with practitioners using this approach to DEI work indicates that lessons from our SEL work hold particular promise for today's more hostile climate, as well. Where appropriate, we bring in the perspectives of leaders in the field we have worked with more recently to update and add complexity to our original data.

Our analyses indicated five common challenges that warrant extra consideration as leaders plan to implement SEL on their own campuses:

1. Transitioning to a shared leadership approach

2. Accountability

3. Disparities in leaders' personal journeys

4. Unevenness in different departments or units across the organization

5. Working together across differences in power and privilege

These challenges were common but navigable for most institutions in our study.

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[1] Please see Appendix A for more detail on the methodology for the overall project as well as the methodology for this report.

However, we also identified three additional challenges that had the potential to derail SEL efforts if they're not intentionally and carefully addressed:

1. Poor relationships and lack of trust
2. Lack of senior leadership support
3. Hostile state political climate

In each section, we explore the challenges leaders faced and some strategies they shared that helped them navigate these challenges.

Section 1: Common but navigable challenges

Our interviews with campus leaders reveal a set of common challenges most campuses faced as they transitioned to a more shared approach to DEI leadership. These challenges were ultimately navigable—that is, they didn't derail or shut down the work—but they seemed to crop up consistently across nearly every campus in our study. In this section, we describe the five common challenges we noted, as well as strategies for navigating these challenges.

Transitioning to a shared leadership approach

Shared equity leadership represents a change to the way most campuses do their DEI work—from focused in a single department or unit to shared more broadly across the organization. Many campuses experienced challenges that were specific to transitioning to a shared leadership approach. This transition represents a shift in organizational routines, i.e., the regular patterns and ways of operating within the organization (Becker, 2004). Old routines include things like not needing to coordinate with others across campus, only undertaking DEI-related initiatives that are very specific to one's local context rather than connected to broader institutional goals, or depending on the DEI office to implement DEI-specific projects. SEL requires new routines, such as cross-campus coordination, benchmarking local goals and initiatives with broader institutional ones, and embedding responsibility for decision-making in unit-level leaders, such as deans or directors. There was still a lot of ambiguity around these new routines on most of the campuses we studied, and so there was a continuous need to navigate and re-navigate these new ways of operating. We describe a few specific ways this challenge played out in this section.

Leaders in our study described their attempts to share leadership for DEI as confusing, messy, unclear, uncertain and uncoordinated. On many campuses, there was no template for this type of collaborative leadership, and leaders felt they were creating something entirely new in a system built to be hierarchical and individualistic. Many leaders pointed to the difficulty of coalescing around common equity goals when attempting to coordinate previously disparate pockets of work. For example, one unit or school might be focused explicitly on racial equity in terms of student outcomes or faculty tenure and promotion, while another might center on gender diversity in admissions or hiring. Many campus stakeholders struggled to keep people focused on their common institutional goals and learning how to make their own local goals fit within the overall framework. Used to operating on their own, these "equity entrepreneurs," as one leader described them, continued to go "off in different directions…sometimes in ways that weren't productive," which could undermine institutional efforts.

Additionally, when more leaders are responsible for equity work instead of just a single leader or a single office, faculty and staff who are newly responsible for equity goals don't always know who to approach to get things done. Several interviewees noted a desire among faculty and staff to go to "the person in charge" of DEI to ask for help or permission with their work, when in fact that permission-granting should instead become embedded in leaders' existing roles. For example, one senior leader described how faculty in a particular department sought permission from them for a cluster hire for DEI faculty, but they really needed permission from their dean since the dean was ultimately responsible for hiring in that department. Similarly, a leader on another campus described uncertainty around who should be responding to DEI-related issues in their new SEL environment:

> "Sometimes, it's [confusion around] who is tactically [responsible] in terms of who responds to it. [For example,] a student incident—is it the president? Is it the head of student affairs? Is it the head of the DEI office? Do you see what I mean? There are coordination problems at all levels when things are happening."

Navigating shared leadership challenges

Campuses used several strategies to navigate ambiguities that arose when attempting to share leadership more broadly. These included developing a shared vision for DEI work, establishing clear and transparent lines of responsibility for specific goals and strategies, developing communications plans to publicize their new shared approach to DEI work, and creating new cross-campus coordination routines and structures.

First, campuses worked to develop a shared vision for the DEI work that had been disconnected in the past. This often took time to bring different groups' perspectives into a broader discussion. And it also meant honoring that there may not be full consensus but that they needed a broader institutional perspective to guide the work across campus and allowed

for variations that met local goals and needs. For example, some campuses had an institution-wide DEI plan with goals and metrics that each unit, school or college had to align themselves with. These goals and metrics were often quite broad, and individual units could work with central DEI office staff to create local goals that would work for them and still align with the institutional vision.

Second, they were extremely clear and transparent about who was responsible for particular goals or strategies. For example, one campus publicly named individual leaders who were responsible for specific equity initiatives so others on campus knew who to contact for specific programs. In some cases, this clear and public naming of leaders led to the creation of new organization charts or diagrams depicting these new responsibilities. The next section, which discusses accountability, further examines the need for clear delineation of responsibility.

Third, some campuses were in the process of developing a communications plan to publicize their new shared approach to DEI leadership. One leader noted that because their approach was such a departure from status quo ways of doing DEI work, communicating about that approach was especially important:

> "The thing that I've heard from students…is they're like, 'Well, what's going on?' And I think…when it is really grassroots [versus] when it's really a single person doing the work, then…you know that [when] we need to talk about the DEI stuff we need to talk to this one person, and we know who that person is. Whereas here, there is a DEI liaison for every school and college. I actually think that's a good thing, but I can see people not knowing that that's a thing, and then if they don't know then they don't know who that one person is that they could talk to. So there's definitely I think a PR [public relations] thing, and so if we're trying to increase capacity, increase people's understanding and awareness, you've got to have a PR campaign that goes along with it so that people who are on the ground actually know [about the structure], and when they want to be able to contribute they can."

Finally, campuses created new routines around cross-campus coordination to help them navigate the confusion and ambiguity they were experiencing. One campus created regular spaces for DEI leaders in each department or division to come together and talk "about what they're doing in their department and their local units, and just kind of having an organic conversation, so sharing ideas in that space." These spaces helped leaders coordinate and ensure their work was aligned with institutional goals and not operating at cross purposes. The campus also paired more experienced DEI leaders with those who had less experience to better support

their growth and development. These new routines helped embed shared leadership approaches within the organization and began to undo some of the older patterns leaders struggled to break.

For more suggestions on how to organize SEL work, please also see our earlier report on structuring and organizing the work (Holcombe et al., 2022a). Our report on what this work can look like in different roles may also offer helpful insights for leaders struggling with this particular challenge (Holcombe et al., 2022b).

Accountability[2]

Another challenge campuses faced was how to create new accountability structures that would help institutionalize their new SEL routines. Given the shifts with broader distribution of authority and responsibility noted in the last section, it's logical campuses would face challenges around developing a new system of accountability.

First, some campuses that began their SEL work from a more bottom-up or middle-out approach rather than a top-down approach found difficulties holding senior leaders accountable for DEI leadership. For example, one mid-level leader described how many senior leaders on campus "think other people need to be trained and educated and don't realize what they need themselves." A leader on another campus described challenges holding deans accountable for DEI-specific outcomes:

> "Even though the initial DEI plans were really built from the ground up, one of the challenges connected to that was that the deans didn't feel ownership for the plan that was generated in their school or college. And they didn't want to be held accountable for it. So there was a real resistance to any kind of accountability. And so at every juncture, the communication was consistent that the strategic priorities, goals, and action items set in the DEI strategic plans for a school or a college would be reported on annually, the progress would be reported, and those would be made public. It was kind of the commitment to competition that got [deans] in there, not some kind of value of accountability. And there's been a real strain connected to it. So part of [our focus in] the second

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2   For more information about challenges to accountability in shared equity leadership, please see our earlier report (Kezar et al., 2022). This report focuses exclusively on new accountability structures in SEL environments and features a section on challenges and tensions to accountability. We briefly highlight here a few of those challenges we feel are especially relevant for leaders interested in starting SEL.

round of planning is how do we connect the deans to the planning process itself at the beginning so that they are helping to set the strategic priorities instead of receiving a plan that was developed by other people in their school? Because we need them to feel ownership, mostly because we can't truly make them accountable."

This leader noted that the lack of engagement from senior leaders early in the planning process—a common situation on many campuses—can have a compounding effect because senior leaders feel less responsible and accountable for DEI work because of their lack of involvement.

Another aspect of accountability that proved challenging for campuses was deciding what to measure and how to measure it. In terms of what to measure, leaders described many conversations about which metrics were important to measure beyond just disaggregating persistence and graduation data by race, income and first-generation student status. On some campuses, even getting this disaggregated data was an initial challenge, and leaders had to build partnerships with institutional research (IR) offices to support this capacity. Then, campuses grappled with what to do with this disaggregated data once they had it. For example, one leader described debates on their campus about how to handle course-level data that were disaggregated by race. They struggled with how to translate information about course racial equity gaps into meaningful conversations about making structural changes to courses and pedagogy and not devolve into attacks on individual faculty members. Leaders also described the importance of measuring things beyond just grades and course and program completion and graduation rates but having trouble identifying what exactly those things should be. Here's how one leader described some of the questions they were grappling with:

> "I just want to think about accountability differently. I really do. I want to think about what institutional accountability means, and what it means to instantiate a practice of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging that we're all practicing all the time, and that we're all explaining when harm is done, and that we're all trying to repair. That it's a practice. And what would it mean if we were all—faculty, staff and students—in the practice of this work? Because checking boxes does nothing. It doesn't make anything different. It doesn't make anything better, except you get to say 100% of your people went through this training."

A third aspect of accountability that campuses struggled with was how to help people develop a sense of self-accountability when it comes to leadership for DEI. This notion of self-accountability is so important that it's codified as an SEL value. Because formal accountability systems for

SEL were still evolving, for the work to be truly distributed across campus, leaders had to hold themselves accountable for stepping up and doing the work—even if it wasn't officially rewarded. Participants in our study noted that these notions of self-accountability often ran counter to cultural norms in academia, where faculty often feel they don't have a role to play in promoting equity due to norms around faculty autonomy and academic freedom:

> "I think there's no question that we are not immune from the sort of academic culture that you framed it as. We constantly have to keep pushing back on the notion that this is just something that 'oh, that staff member is in charge of making sure that kid gets through' versus 'I should really rethink my curriculum and make sure.'"

Norms around autonomy often clashed with the value of self-accountability in the model as some employees on campus used their professional norms to evade self-accountability.

Navigating accountability challenges

Leaders described several strategies for navigating accountability challenges. These strategies included involving senior leaders in planning and goal setting earlier so they have greater buy-in, being clear and public about how progress on DEI strategic plans would be reported, and leveraging the values of competition and cooperation among deans to get them to take their college's DEI goals seriously. Campuses in our study also experimented with measuring a variety of new metrics and processes, including hiring, incentives and rewards, classroom practices, campus climate, and faculty and staff behavior. (For more detail on these new approaches to accountability, please see Kezar et al. (2022)). Additionally, leaders leaned on the SEL practice of "modeling" to help navigate this challenge by publicly holding themselves accountable for decision-making, processes, and outcomes around DEI-related issues.

The important takeaway is that campus leaders interested in starting SEL on their campus must think about accountability differently in terms of what they're measuring, how they're measuring it, and how to ensure leaders up and down the organizational hierarchy are accountable for DEI leadership.

Disparities in leaders' personal journeys

Another challenge organizations faced as they endeavored to share leadership for DEI more broadly across campus was disparities in individuals' personal journey work toward critical consciousness. As a reminder, the personal journey toward critical consciousness is the notion that for leaders to effectively transform their institutions, they must first do the important work of transforming themselves. This personal work is an ongoing journey of introspection and learning that helps leaders develop an understanding of various social identities and how they differently shape the ways people

experience the world around them, as well as the structural and systemic nature of inequity. The personal journey is a core and necessary part of SEL; it requires a critical mass of leaders engaged authentically in their personal journey toward critical consciousness. When leaders—particularly some White leaders and others from privileged identities—struggle to engage in this work, it presents a challenge for the rest of the campus's leadership team that is working to implement SEL. For example, many leaders in our study described the challenge of working with White leaders who either outright refused or more implicitly deflected attempts to engage in conversations about their own privilege and the role of Whiteness and racism in driving inequity on campus. Several participants, both White leaders and leaders of color, labeled this response "White fragility" (DiAngelo, 2011) and noted its impact on stifling progress. One Black leader in our study described her frustration with her White peers who had not made meaningful progress on their personal journey and the impact on her when White leaders did make the effort to learn and grow:

> "And am I available to answer questions and be supportive in anyone's growth? Am I wanting to learn more about my background or perspective from a Black woman? I would say that it's really refreshing when people take it upon themselves to educate themselves without expecting their peers of color to educate them about it. That really takes away some of the emotional burden of the work. Sometimes I'm sitting in these meetings with faculty and I'm just like, you're 45 years old—how come you don't know about your own privilege?"

Study participants also noted how unexamined implicit biases continued to operate on their campuses. For example, several leaders at one campus described an incident in which a group of leaders of color advocated for a policy change that would alter admissions requirements for a particular program to eliminate barriers that mostly affected students of color. The policy change was originally presented to the faculty senate by a faculty member of color, where it faced significant opposition and was rejected. The group slightly tweaked their proposal and recruited a prominent White faculty member to help present it the following year, when it was then accepted and adopted. While the group was pleased that their proposal was ultimately accepted, they were equally frustrated at how the process had unfolded in a way that confirmed the biases of the faculty senate. These types of experiences eroded trust and detracted from the campus's ability to do this work collaboratively.

Navigating personal journey challenges

The primary strategy that participants used to support leaders who were struggling to engage authentically in their personal journey involved one-on-one coaching or mentoring to help leaders grow and learn, though leaders also noted the importance of respectfully "calling out" and "calling in" leaders who struggled with White fragility or bias. One (White) leader in our study who engaged in mentoring to help other White leaders grow on their personal journey likened this type of coaching to the spiral model of curriculum design. In the spiral model, topics (in this case, equity and racial equity topics) are revisited with increasing levels of complexity over time (Bruner, 1960; Harden, 1999). This leader described the tension of giving mentees just enough new material to reflect on that would keep them learning and growing without alienating them:

> "And so that notion of making sure that you're not pushing people to the breaking point, to the point where they disengage, of really trying to be a good listener, so that you know where that boundary is, that's going to make them slightly uncomfortable, pushing them to grow, without pushing them over. And it's hard sometimes to find that."

Other leaders described the importance of developing a process for bringing attention to instances of White fragility or implicit bias when they arose in a way that was private and informal rather than public so they wouldn't immediately evoke defensiveness:

> "It is helpful to be able to have a process for naming some of these things [related to White fragility or implicit bias] without calling somebody out. And so I would be careful—I've seen people do the finger wagging and call them out—but [we are figuring out] how to do that in a respectful manner and to help others to have empathy."

When public callouts were necessary, as may be required in some instances, leaders did so in ways that were respectful and empathetic. Leaders were working to normalize an environment of respectful and empathetic honesty—what some called a generous critical spirit—that holds people accountable for their behavior in a way that assumes positive intent and desire to learn. For more suggestions on how to support leaders on their personal journey, please also see our report on capacity building, specifically strategies for building personal capacity (Holcombe et al, 2023).

Unevenness in different departments or units across the organization

Campuses also struggled with unevenness across the organization when it came to distributing leadership for DEI. Some units or departments had subcultures that were more resistant or challenging to break through. This is closely related to the notion of some individuals not authentically engaging in their personal journey but distinct in that this

unevenness went beyond individuals and was embedded in departments or programs. For example, faculty leaders working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) departments and honors programs described the challenges they faced in getting their colleagues to rethink traditional standards of excellence or achievement and center equity in their curriculum and pedagogical design. One participant highlighted STEM departments in particular pushing back on getting engaged in DEI work:

> "[Some STEM faculty] were resistant, [saying] 'we can't really do anything because we're just teaching biology. …you can't really talk about race as much compared to how in an English class you're able to do this, in psychology you're able to do that.' So they were like, 'this doesn't apply to us,' when it really does in terms of increasing BIPOC students in STEM classes and also…the history of why certain things in science had a really detrimental impact on people of color. So that's the kind of things they could've talked about, but they were really resistant about that. There are obviously people who were like, 'oh yeah, we can do this,' and then there were people who were like, 'no, this doesn't really apply to us at all. This can be a problem for the English department or the psychology department or anthropology and some other groups,' they were phrasing it that way. It was like a game of tag. They were like, 'tag, you're it, now it's yours,' and then they kept passing it on. So that's what made our work difficult as well, because it kept being passed along because nobody wanted to do it."

The cultures of STEM disciplines can reinforce the notion that science is objective and value-free, leading STEM faculty to believe there's no place for DEI work in science (Harding, 1994; Le & Matias, 2019; Posselt, 2020; Perez et al., 2022). Staff in business affairs, finance, financial aid and fundraising similarly described challenges with their subcultures, as this leader noted:

> "There would be departments on campus that have maintained other cultures, you know, more of a gatekeeping culture, traditional. So there's a lot of embedded cultures within the university. Again, the financial aid office, for example, tends to be very difficult. A lot of people go into financial aid billing because they really want to help people, and then as soon as they walk into the office they're browbeaten repeatedly about compliance issues."

The values promoted by these gatekeeping or compliance cultures are often antithetical to the values of SEL, making these spaces on campus slow and difficult to change. Even when these more resistant departments or units do begin to make progress, they often change their practices before examining their values or before engaging in their personal journey, leading to a sense of inauthenticity in the work from supporters. For example, one campus was working to expand their dual-enrollment program, where high school students could take college courses, because as one leader pointed out, "studies have shown that dual-enrollment programs often result in higher success rates for our students of color, particularly our Black and brown students." However, this leader went on to say that campus stakeholders who were responsible for finance only wanted to expand the program because dual enrollment brings in more funding per student than a traditionally enrolled college student. This approach frustrated those DEI leaders who were deeply engaged in the work because while leaders in finance were ultimately supporting this equity-oriented policy, their values had not changed to align with the broader organizational values.

Navigating challenges with organizational unevenness

The main strategy for navigating this challenge described by leaders in our study involved harnessing the more proactive units to apply positive peer pressure on laggards. Participants saw this unevenness as an inevitability more than an obstacle due to the more distributed nature of SEL. One leader estimated that "a third of the folks are early adopters, a third of them are not even going to participate, and some folks in the middle will kind of maybe come along." Another participant described how the participation of early adopters could eventually encourage those in the middle and those who are not inclined to participate to get on board:

> "When you have [dozens of] units, some are going to be more proactive than others. You're going to see laggards among the leaders, always. All you can do is keep plodding on because we don't have sticks that beat those who are laggards. All we have is nudging and highlighting of the leaders in the hopes that eventually, the laggards say 'gosh, we're being left behind here.'"

This sort of peer pressure and rewarding of leaders was a similar strategy to the one we described earlier in the section on challenges to accountability. Though it's not easy to apply consequences or punishments for those units lagging behind, positive peer pressure seemed to be an effective way of pushing along those units or departments that weren't moving forward at a pace aligned with others.

Working together across different levels of power and privilege

A fifth challenge campuses faced as they worked to implement SEL was working together effectively across different levels of power and privilege. SEL includes leaders across all levels of the organizational hierarchy—from senior

leaders to mid-level leaders to ground-level leaders and even students. While this breadth of power and responsibility is a key source of strength for the SEL approach, sometimes campuses did struggle with these power differentials.

Several participants pointed out that junior faculty or staff, especially those of color, faced much more risk when standing up and challenging the status quo than did more senior leaders, particularly tenured faculty. These leaders with less power and privilege could face potentially negative consequences to their professional relationships and even lose their jobs if they advocated for something deemed controversial by senior leaders. These leaders sometimes felt they had to be more careful in what they said and how they said it when they were in spaces with more senior leaders.

Similarly, DEI leaders themselves had different levels of power and authority within the institution. For example, on campuses that had formal DEI representatives or leaders within each college or unit, participants described a wide variety of titles, salaries and positionings within the unit that led to significant differences in what these leaders were able to accomplish in their roles. Some DEI leaders only had DEI responsibilities as a portion of their job responsibility, lacked training and expertise in DEI issues, or held very junior roles. These leaders were often taken less seriously than their counterparts who held more senior titles or had considerably more expertise in their roles, and they often lacked power and authority to make structural changes, as this leader noted:

> "They're trying to change policy, and they're like the accountant and they need to change policy related to, I don't know, hiring. Like nobody's going to listen to you. So they really do a lot more work around awareness, and they host events, and they have talks, which are very, very important. But that's not where policy and systems change."

Another leader affirmed this challenge:

> "I was hired in as a chief diversity officer [in my school]. I'm probably one of the highest paid DEI professionals in this role across the institution. People who are in my position in other schools and units, they could be paid half as much as I'm paid and have half as much authority as I have. I have a lot of influence in the school. I also report directly to the dean, whereas in other schools and units this isn't necessarily going to be the case. So I think each school and unit was asked to develop a structure, redistribute funding within its structure to make this happen, but perhaps it would be better for the future to have some standards with regard to positioning all of these DEI leads to be able to do what the school really wants them to be able to do. There's a lot of variance."

Navigating challenges of power and privilege

Strategies to navigate this challenge varied depending on whether campuses had formal DEI leaders positioned throughout the organization or not, though all campuses benefited from leaning into the SEL practice of "diminishing hierarchy."

On campuses with formal DEI leaders distributed throughout the organization, a more standard and consistent positioning of DEI leaders within each unit would diminish some of these challenges. Some sort of organization-wide guidance on seniority and salary range would ensure that DEI leaders have similar abilities to impact change within their local spheres of influence.

Campuses without formal DEI leaders distributed throughout the organization should still pay attention to differences in power and authority as they build more collaborative spaces for DEI leadership work. One senior faculty member described how they navigated this challenge by taking the lead on controversial proposals to "protect" more vulnerable junior leaders:

> "I've been on this campus so long and I have some amount of positionality. I could basically stand [up] and take some slings and some arrows that some people who are less protected couldn't take. So I think it's also important when you do this spreading out of labor to put some thought there and say, okay, people are going to be targeted in this work. Can it be done in a way where people who have relative privilege can take more of the brunt of the attacks, where at the same time—and here's where you have to be careful—when credit is appropriate to be taken, it goes to the right people? Now I've been on my campus forever. I don't need any more credit. I'm just interested in the work. If it gets somebody else's name attached to it and that helps their career or whatever, I'm fine with that. I don't care about who's getting the rewards. I just want our institution to get better for the future students and future employees. But there is also this sort of—if I can take a bullet for somebody and they're not in a place to take it, I can stand up and do that because I'm old, I've got thick skin, and it's okay, whereas other people might be more vulnerable."

Attention to the SEL practice of "diminishing hierarchy" can also help in spaces where leaders with different levels of power and privilege are brought together. This practice involves taking specific actions to minimize the impacts of power differentials. Its enactment—and responsibility for navigating this challenge more generally—should fall primarily on the more powerful or senior leaders in these spaces to minimize power differentials and make safer environments for those with less power and privilege to feel comfortable participating fully.

As we noted at the beginning of this section, the preceding challenges were vexing, but they weren't deal-breakers for the campuses in our study. We shared various strategies leaders used to effectively navigate these challenges, and we hope those strategies can help others interested in implementing SEL.

Section 2: Significant challenges that have the potential to derail SEL efforts

Our research also uncovered several challenges that were much more difficult to overcome for leaders. These are the challenges that, if not addressed, could derail efforts to implement SEL, which is why we're addressing them separately. These challenges deserve extra attention from leaders trying to implement SEL because they're so critical to the success of SEL efforts.

Poor relationships and lack of trust

Just as the relational practices are pivotal for leaders implementing SEL, relational challenges are crucial to resolve if campuses want to make meaningful headway implementing SEL. Because SEL is a collaborative approach to equity leadership, the leaders who are collaborating must have, if not positive relationships, then at least functional ones for this approach to work.

The campuses in our study that struggled the most to implement shared approaches to equity leadership almost universally struggled with challenging relationships. For example, leaders at one campus attributed their difficulties getting departments on the same page around DEI goals to the contentious and even hostile relationships among senior leaders across several different departments. They were struggling to build a shared structure for DEI work, and one leader noted how the dysfunctional relationships also contributed to ongoing structural dysfunction:

> "I think the relationships did not help resolve the structural issues. I think if the relationships had been better, that together, we all could have collaborated and addressed the structural problems."

Leaders at every level noted examples of colleagues not treating one another with respect when it came to implementing their equity agenda. For example, one leader in academic affairs described an environment of hostility when they tried to broaden access for underrepresented students to a campus program:

> "There was a lot of, I guess, gaslighting, you could say. It was pretty mean. Pretty mean on campus. For me, it still trails me and everything that I do today. I don't know if it's just the mindset. I don't

know if it's personal or just the idea of not wanting to be curious and see what else is out there…[but] there was really a lot of resistance. And even folks of color that I thought would be my allies or my accomplices really, really pushed back."

It is not completely clear whether leaders on this campus struggled to have respectful discussions about important philosophical differences or approaches due to their poor relationships or whether the "mean" responses to this proposal negatively impacted relationships—it was likely a little of both. Regardless, relationships weren't characterized by respect or the assumption of positive intent, and leaders struggled to make collective progress on their equity goals as a result.

A key driver of the negative relationships was a lack of transparency (an SEL value) and trust (an SEL practice). Leaders on one campus in our study described how they felt the president and senior leaders made decisions about the equity agenda by fiat with little public discussion of why or how those decisions were made. These participants talked about a general lack of trust across the organization that contributed to ongoing dysfunctional relationships and inability to successfully collaborate on equity work. One leader described the impact of this lack of trust:

> "I think the biggest barrier right now is just like this level of trust. It's incredibly important with something as sensitive as [DEI work] just that the campus community trusts each other and trusts their leadership. And when that's not there, it just all goes up in smoke. And I kind of feel like we're struggling with that right now, to be frank."

Mistrust and suspicion fed into negative relationships and contributed to an ongoing cycle of dysfunction and stagnation, with little advancement or progress on equity goals.

Navigating challenges with relationships and lack of trust

We suggest different strategies for navigating this challenge depending on the current state of relationships on campus. If relationships are already negative or even toxic, as in the examples we described above, often a reset of some sort is required. For example, at one campus a new president came in and alienated many faculty with their attempts to broaden responsibility for DEI work, which faculty felt ignored existing shared governance structures. Relationships deteriorated, but this president took responsibility and offered a mea culpa to faculty as they decided to walk back their initial plan and instead collaborate more directly with faculty to determine the right approach. This president noted that this reset took nearly a year but they were able to both repair relationships

and ultimately accomplish their goals of sharing leadership for DEI with meaningful faculty support due to directly owning their mistake and apologizing.

If relationships aren't actively negative but also not particularly strong, leaders have somewhat of a stronger foundation from which to build. Strategies for building stronger relationships include SEL practices and values such as building trust and emphasizing transparency in communication across campus. These strategies involve spending time meeting with different groups, listening and hearing their views and understanding their perspectives before making decisions and moving forward. Many leaders also described the importance of getting to know one another as humans and not just colleagues, whether by starting potentially intense meetings with some sort of personal activity (e.g., bringing a favorite song that describes how you feel about the topic you'll be discussing; sharing a picture of something personally meaningful), having team lunches or dinners, or just being intentional about getting to know more about colleagues' lives beyond their campus responsibilities.

Lack of senior leadership support

Our original SEL study focused on campuses with senior leadership support for shared approaches to equity work. Almost universally, our research participants noted the importance of presidential support and advocacy in order for this approach to be successful institution wide. Public declarations of support from presidents had a significant impact on leaders' ability to recruit others across campus and to convince skeptics that their engagement was important.

Campus leaders we've worked with since our original research was conducted have reiterated this idea and shared how they struggled to implement SEL without senior leadership buy-in and support. While SEL is a collective and nonhierarchical approach to equity leadership, because it represents a departure from status quo ways of operating in American higher education, it does require support from the top of the organizational hierarchy, at least at first. This paradox is commonly noted throughout the literature on shared leadership more broadly—the necessity of those with the most power in the organization essentially giving some of it up to make this approach function properly (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Holcombe et al., 2021). Presidents can doom SEL efforts if they are unsupportive, signaling they don't value DEI efforts or they believe a more siloed and largely symbolic approach will be sufficient.

Conversely, if presidents are too involved in the details and attempt to control or micro-manage the efforts, they also set their campuses up for struggle or failure. For example, leaders on one campus described how their president attended meetings of their SEL leadership group and "talked the whole time and basically said, "This is what I want to see in the plan." It didn't rub me the right way because I was like,

"You're leaving this up to us, but yet you're basically telling us what you want to see in the plan." To truly embed equity work throughout the institution, presidents must be willing to both publicly support SEL and give up some control by allowing others to lead.

Campuses also struggled to institutionalize SEL if their boards were unsupportive or if they didn't understand or value the SEL approach. While board engagement wasn't as crucial as presidential engagement for starting SEL, it was important for sustaining SEL in the face of other crises and priorities. One leader in our study described their campus's board as "walled off from everybody" when it came to DEI issues despite the board having "so much power and influence."

Navigating challenges with senior leadership support

Strategies for calibrating the right level of senior leadership support included translating SEL goals into language that resonates with senior leaders; denoting one or a few cabinet members to ensure senior leaders aren't overly involved or micromanaging the efforts; and creating board committees focused specifically on DEI and SEL efforts.

To garner more support from senior leaders, stakeholders can think about how to translate their SEL goals and interests into language that will resonate with the interests and priorities of senior leaders. For example, pointing to evidence about how shared leadership approaches can produce better outcomes in a variety of contexts (read more in Holcombe et al. (2021), a book on shared leadership), bringing in leaders from other organizations who have successfully implemented SEL, or leveraging the influence of national organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE, a partner in the SEL research) can help promote buy-in among senior leaders.

To ensure senior leaders weren't the main drivers of SEL, many senior leaders charged a member of their cabinet to keep them in check and ensure they weren't overstepping their involvement, or being too hands-on and not allowing others to have voice or power. Having a few people provide feedback to the president can be an important way to ensure the effort doesn't feel too top-down. These cabinet members should also keep their ears to the ground asking others their impressions about the roll out of SEL and whether others feel empowered to act.

In terms of campuses that struggle with board support, some campuses started DEI board committees to begin supporting board members on their personal journeys and brainstorm ways for the board to become more involved in SEL efforts. One campus also set up meetings between their DEI board committee and one of their campus DEI committees to build stronger connections. While this board-specific work was

still emergent at the time of our study, it held promise for engaging the board in ways that could potentially embed a shared approach to equity leadership more deeply into the campus's ways of operating.

A lack of senior leadership support (whether presidential or board support) for starting SEL on a particular campus doesn't mean grassroots or mid-level leaders are precluded from beginning to share leadership for DEI in their own spheres of influence. Indeed, many of the campuses we've worked with since our original study began SEL from the bottom up or from the middle out—in a department, school or college, or even a division rather than campuswide. Especially on larger or more decentralized campuses, local units can have a lot of autonomy to manage and organize equity work in the ways that they see fit. When we describe lack of senior leadership support as having the potential to derail SEL efforts, we mean at the whole-institution level rather than the local level. While efforts may not begin with senior leadership support, to institutionalize SEL over time, senior leadership buy-in is essential.

Hostile state political climate

A final challenge to SEL implementation that has the potential to bring the work to a halt is a hostile political climate at the local or state level, especially for public institutions. When we collected our original SEL data (2020–2021), there was a broad sense of support in higher education for DEI and antiracist work, specifically in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests. However, shortly thereafter a political backlash to DEI efforts began, especially in more conservative-leaning states, and continues at the time of this writing.

Legislation has been introduced in dozens of states outlawing DEI staff and offices, prohibiting mandatory diversity training, banning diversity statements in hiring or promotion, and/or preventing consideration of race/ethnicity, sex, or national origin in hiring or admissions decisions. Bills have been signed into law in Texas, Utah, Tennessee, Florida, North Dakota, and North Carolina (DEI Legislation Tracker, 2024). Many of these bills were based on model legislation released and promoted by the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank that has played a significant role in leading the anti-DEI charge across the nation (Rufo et al., 2023).

Bills are becoming increasingly more detailed, with a recent example in Idaho listing 35 specific positions across several campuses that would be eliminated were the bill to be signed into law (Zahneis, 2024). Furthermore, the Supreme Court's decisions prohibiting race-based affirmative action have already begun to produce a chilling effect when it comes to equity work; conservative lawyers and activists have begun to generate claims against race-based scholarships and programs in addition to admissions policies (Knox, 2023).

This political landscape has been greatly discouraging to leaders who care about making higher education more diverse, equitable and inclusive. These challenges affect everyone doing DEI work, not just those working to implement SEL.

Navigating hostile state political climates

Our original SEL data didn't address this more recent backlash, though we did work with several campuses that were operating in conservative political environments that even in 2020–2021 weren't as receptive to DEI work. Leaders on these campuses—as well as leaders on other campuses we've worked with more recently in the course of our consulting and practice-based work—shared a few strategies that have helped them navigate hostile political environments and still make progress on their equity goals. These strategies included creatively emphasizing different equity foci (depending on the level of political opposition), developing positive relationships with political opponents, and embedding the work across campus in ways that makes it difficult to locate and cut.

First, leaders operating in these environments noted that race and race-focused activities are often the most hot-button issues that are sure to attract negative attention from conservative activists. All of these leaders believed deeply in the importance of antiracist work and the centrality of race in equity issues. However, they also recognized the reality of their political contexts and saw how polarizing anything related to race had become. These leaders suggested several creative ways to focus on, for example, increasing admissions of racially minoritized students without explicitly naming race as their target, or promoting diverse hiring without alienating potential opponents. For example, one public campus focused on recruiting and admitting students from low-income backgrounds and from certain economically depressed areas of the state that also happened to be majority Black and Latin/e. Leaders on another majority-White campus described using an ADVANCE grant from the National Science Foundation to promote recruitment of women in STEM as a way to ease campus stakeholders into talking about identity-based diversity. This "delicate approach," as one leader described it, helped the campus community better understand the ways women faced implicit bias and discrimination in the sciences and opened their minds a bit to being willing to consider race and ethnicity as well.

Another strategy leaders described as helpful for accomplishing their goals in hostile or oppositional political climates was similar to an important SEL strategy— developing positive relationships with political opponents. While this isn't always possible or safe for all campus leaders to attempt, we noted several examples of senior leaders intentionally cultivating relationships with conservative

politicians or trustees. One senior leader described how they were able to turn political opponents into "believers" and "allies" by focusing on the mission of their campus as an economic engine for the state and tying DEI goals into this argument.

These strategies may be less effective on campuses in states that have already outlawed DEI work, however. In these states, we offer that SEL itself can serve as a strategy for navigating this new political landscape. By embedding the work in faculty, administrative and staff roles across campus, it is less of a target for cuts. While it can shield DEI work from these new laws, an SEL approach also ensures a critical mass of people working to promote equity on campus even if specific positions get eliminated. Additionally, making equity-oriented work part of routine administrative practices—such as disaggregating data to look for gaps among various groups—can further embed the work into the fabric of the institution and make it more difficult for opponents to locate and cut.

Campuses can still support leaders in developing their personal journey by using strategies such as individual mentoring and modeling, voluntary book clubs, or learning communities rather than mandated trainings. A few of the SEL practices may need to be rethought in these environments—especially structural practices like creating rewards or incentives for engaging in DEI work and allocating budgets to units that meet DEI goals (rethinking accountability). The SEL values are intangible and more challenging for political leaders to attack. Leaders can continue to foreground the SEL values such as vulnerability or love and care in their practice regardless of state laws. The SEL value of creativity and imagination will be crucial for leaders to activate as they think of new strategies for navigating politically challenging environments (Kezar & Holcombe, forthcoming). The practices of learning and helping others to learn can also be drawn upon to marshal evidence that demonstrates the efficacy of DEI work.[3]

This challenge is perhaps the most significant and potentially existential of all the ones we observed in our work. Legislators in some states (e.g., Nebraska) are now trying to outlaw even ideas and theories associated with DEI, such as "advancing theories of unconscious or implicit bias, cultural appropriation, allyship, transgenderism, microaggressions, microinvalidation, group marginalization, antiracism, systemic oppression, ethnocentrism, structural racism or inequity, social justice, intersectionality, neopronouns, inclusive language, heteronormativity, disparate impact, gender identity or theory, racial or sexual privilege, or any concept substantially related to any of these theories" (Nebraska Legislative Bill 1330). Yet even these challenges are not impossible to navigate. We hope to continue learning from and with the leaders who are doing this work in the

face of these particular pressures and challenges and offer additional strategies for navigating them in the months and years to come.

Conclusions and recommendations

Working to dismantle inequitable systems and structures in higher education is inherently challenging work because it goes against the centuries-long status quo. Doing this work in a manner that is collaborative and relational, where responsibility and influence are distributed rather than centralized in an office or single role, can bring even more challenges as it pushes up against another set of status quo values and norms around leadership and power. We hope highlighting some of the more common challenges that cropped up on campuses implementing SEL can help other campuses undertaking this work for the first time anticipate and head them off.

The first set of challenges we discussed included challenges transitioning to shared leadership approaches, difficulties navigating accountability, disparities in leaders' personal journeys, unevenness in different departments or units across the organization, and working together across differences in power and privilege. These challenges were significant, but they were all ultimately navigable by the campuses in our study, and they should be easier to navigate if campuses anticipate them while making plans to implement SEL. In addition to the navigation strategies we describe in this report, several of our earlier SEL reports can also support leaders in creating the infrastructure for SEL that can help mitigate these challenges. We briefly referenced them earlier and reiterate them below:

- Our report on organizing and structuring SEL (Holcombe et al., 2022a) describes several different ways of organizing the work that can help campuses struggling with the transition to shared leadership. Additionally, our report on roles can support campuses in reflecting on how best to organize or share the work across many different organizational roles (Holcombe et al., 2022b).

- We have an entire report focused on accountability in SEL environments to help leaders anticipate and navigate challenges to accountability (Kezar et al., 2022). This report also features an extensive accountability-focused tool kit designed to support leaders in proactively heading off this challenge.

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3   Harper & Associates (2024) is a great source of such evidence.

- Leaders navigating any of the last three challenges—disparities in personal journey work, unevenness across departments or units, and navigating power dynamics—can find strategies in our first report (Kezar et al., 2021a) and our SEL Toolkit (Kezar et al., 2021b). Both resources offer suggestions for supporting leaders' development on their personal journey and working together across different levels of power and privilege. Additionally, our report on capacity building helps leaders think through areas where they might be lacking capacity for the work and provides strategies for building the capacity that is needed to navigate uneven personal journey work or unevenness across departments or units (Holcombe et al., 2023).

In terms of the second set of challenges we described—poor relationships and lack of trust, lack of senior leadership support, and hostile political climate—we continue learning from campuses engaged in this work with the goal of more fully developing strategies for navigating these challenges.

Our first report about SEL notes important approaches for building relationships and trust and can be a resource around that challenge (Kezar et al, 2021a). However, we're just starting to conduct research on these other challenges, such as the challenging political climate. Beginning in 2024, we'll be engaged in a study exploring this issue. We'll publish additional reports and resources as soon as we have available information to inform practice.

Our team at the Pullias Center for Higher Education is engaged in ongoing research and technical assistance with campuses across the country that are implementing SEL, and we'll also share lessons from that work as they arise. It's vital for campuses to share their strategies with one another. We hope to establish an SEL community of practice so these and other real-time challenges that arise can be solved by practitioners collaborating to make change within and across campus boundaries.

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Appendix A: Research design and methodology

The data for this report come from a larger qualitative multiple case study of eight campuses involving over 100 leaders. The larger study took place from 2019–2021 and was designed to examine campuses that were attempting to more broadly share leadership and responsibility for DEI work rather than concentrating it within a single office. The qualitative multiple case study aims to understand the human experience of phenomena within their unique contexts and was thus a fitting methodology for understanding how the different campuses were working to distribute leadership for DEI (Stake, 1995).

The larger study looked both within and across cases for features that were both unique and more universal (Stake, 2006). During our initial analyses, we were interested in challenges that campuses faced as they attempted to share leadership for DEI more broadly. However, this topic wasn't one of our central research questions at the time. While we tagged a few instances of common challenges in our data, we didn't do a complete or comprehensive analysis of challenges. For this report, we built on the emergent findings about challenges from our original analysis and performed a secondary data analysis looking specifically at challenges on campuses engaged in shared equity leadership (SEL).

Sampling and case selection

Case selection occurred through a combination of purposive and maximum variation sampling (Stake, 2006; Patton, 2002). Our purposive sampling strategy involved selecting campuses that had all made progress on their DEI goals and were intentionally using a more shared or distributed approach to DEI leadership (Stake, 2006). We constructed an initial list of campuses based on input from our practice partner, the American Council on Education (ACE), and members of our project advisory board (both practitioners and researchers with expertise in DEI and leadership).

Our maximum variation sampling strategy involved selecting campuses that differed on a range of different characteristics to determine whether aspects of context differently shaped campuses' approaches (Patton, 2002). We worked to include campuses of different types, regions and locations, and populations served in our final sample. We began with a list of 23 campuses and narrowed it to a short list of 12 based on variation in the above characteristics. To reach our desired sample size of eight, we held screening calls with presidents of these 12 campuses to ensure that we were selecting the campuses that were most meaningfully sharing leadership responsibility for DEI work.

Data collection

The overall study involved two sources of data: document analysis and interviews. We collected dozens of documents at each campus, including DEI reports, strategic plans, meeting minutes and senior leader messages about DEI, among others. These documents totaled over 1,000 pages and were used to create detailed case profiles of each campus that helped the research team develop the interview protocols. We conducted interviews in two phases.

Phase 1 focused on studying shared leadership for DEI more broadly and took place in the spring and summer of 2020. We interviewed five to eight leaders at each participating institution for a total of 63 interviews. Phase 2 focused on some more specific questions, including roles within SEL environments, accountability, capacity-building, emotional labor, and the organization or structure of SEL and took place throughout 2021.

Phase 2 included follow-up interviews with 16 leaders who participated in the first phase, along with 47 new leaders interviewed for the first time. We conducted 126 interviews in total over Phases 1 and 2. We selected interviewees who were DEI leaders, which we defined as anyone who had responsibility for DEI work on campus, whether faculty, staff, student, senior administrator or community partner. Interview protocols were developed based on literature about DEI leadership and advancing DEI efforts on campus and were shared with leaders ahead of time to allow for reflection. Interviews took place over the phone, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (Phase 1) and Dedoose (Phase 2), software programs that help manage and analyze qualitative data.

Data analysis

As noted above, we were interested in challenges during our initial analyses and noted several emergent themes related to challenges, but we were unable to fully explore them in earlier phases of the study.

This report is based on a secondary analysis of the qualitative data in Phases 1 and 2 of our larger study of SEL. Qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) involves "conducting a more in-depth analysis of themes from the parent study with a subset of data from that study and conducting an analysis of data from the parent study that appear important, but not sufficiently focused on in the primary analysis" (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019, 92, describing an approach put forth by Hinds et al., 1997).

We analyzed clean, uncoded transcripts and documents using Boyatzis's (1998) thematic approach to analysis, which uses both inductive and deductive coding and analysis (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). Our first round of analysis inductively examined the data for any content related to challenges or context. As themes emerged, we created a list of codes and reexamined the data (deductively) using these codes. Part of this process included repeatedly refining codes throughout the analytic process. For example, while we identified 45 distinct types of challenges in our initial inductive analysis, over the next rounds of analysis we were able to further narrow these themes into 15 categories, which we eventually refined into the eight challenges we discuss in this report. These challenges can be divided into two major categories: common yet navigable challenges, and challenges that have the potential to derail SEL efforts if not addressed. We also identified navigation strategies in a similar manner. As each of the authors analyzed the data, we met regularly to compare notes and ensure our emerging understandings were aligned.

About the authors

Elizabeth Holcombe is a senior research associate in the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education. Her current work involves a qualitative study of equity-minded leadership teams in higher education in partnership with the American Council on Education (ACE), as well as the Change Leadership Toolkit. Her research uses an organizational lens to understand various policies and practices that affect student success, including undergraduate teaching and assessment, faculty workforce and development issues, and leadership in higher education.

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