

On Shared Equity Leadership Series

# Shared Equity Leadership

## Making Equity Everyone's Work



**ACE**® American  
Council on  
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**USC** Rossier  
*Pullias Center for  
Higher Education*



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# **Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work**

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## About the Study



### ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION

With generous support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the American Council on Education (ACE), in collaboration with the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC), partnered to conduct a study of shared equity leadership. This effort benefits the higher education sector by filling a critical gap—providing a fuller understanding of what it means when leaders share leadership in service of equity goals. This project consisted of semi-structured interviews with groups of leaders at eight institutions representing different institutional types, contexts, and regions, allowing us to learn more about shared equity leadership.

## About the American Council on Education

The American Council on Education (ACE) is a membership organization that mobilizes the higher education community to shape effective public policy and foster innovative, high-quality practice. As the major coordinating body for the nation's colleges and universities, our strength lies in our diverse membership of more than 1,700 colleges and universities, related associations, and other organizations in America and abroad. ACE is the only major higher education association to represent all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions: two-year and four-year, public and private. Our members educate two out of every three students in all accredited, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

## About the Pullias Center for Higher Education Research

One of the world's leading research centers on higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education advances innovative, scalable solutions to improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The mission of the Pullias Center is to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. The Center is currently engaged in research projects to improve access and outcomes for low-income, first-generation students, improve the performance of postsecondary institutions, assess the role of contingent faculty, understand how colleges can undergo reform in order to increase their effectiveness, analyze emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, and assess the educational trajectories of community college students.

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# Letter from the American Council on Education

Dear Colleagues,

While our nation addresses a devastating worldwide health crisis with severe equity implications, the American Council on Education's (ACE) strategic commitments of advancing equity-minded leadership, institutional transformation, and student success have never been more imperative. A college credential holds the potential to lift people up out of economic hardship, and yet, the promise of higher education remains inaccessible for many of our students of color. At ACE, we stand committed to eliminating systemic racism on campuses through fostering and promoting high-quality institutional practices. True institutional transformation, however, cannot take place without emphasizing the critical role leadership plays in centering equity as a priority, and connecting policy to practice, especially during uncertain times. As such, we are excited to share the findings from our study on shared equity leadership and are grateful to our partners at the University of Southern California Pullias Center for their important collaborative work on this report.

Shared equity leadership provides institutional leaders a unique opportunity to scale their equity work by organizing teams across campus who take collective responsibility in developing and moving the diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda forward. This report and additional forthcoming papers from the study offer a new way of approaching leadership, one that provides leaders practical ways to build shared teams who implement cross-institutional strategies to increase equity on their respective campuses, while also developing and nurturing their own and others' equity mindedness.

The strategies outlined in this report were developed and supported by extensive research. The study is the first of its kind and includes the findings from interviews of more than 60 campus leaders from diverse institutional contexts who practice shared leadership around equity issues. We believe this model brings leaders closer to institutional transformation and effectively improves equity outcomes for students of color. We invite campus leaders to closely examine this approach and consider how it can sustain their institution's important work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Sincerely,

Ted Mitchell  
President  
American Council on Education

# Executive Summary

Decades of programmatic efforts and interventions have failed to make a difference in the success of racially minoritized, low-income, and first-generation students, whose populations are increasing on college campuses. Higher education remains profoundly inequitable, and institutions have not made the transformational changes necessary to create truly inclusive environments and equitable outcomes for students. One prominent lever for creating transformational change is campus leadership. Scholars such as Dowd and Bensimon (2015) have described the role that equity-minded leaders can play in promoting equity agendas on campus. However, there are few detailed empirical studies that focus primarily on the role of leadership in advancing equity in higher education.

In this publication, the first in the “On Shared Equity Leadership” series, we describe how broadly inclusive and collaborative approaches to leadership are necessary to achieve equitable outcomes. We term this approach *shared equity leadership (SEL)*, in which equity becomes everyone’s responsibility and multiple campus stakeholders collectively share leadership for equity. At the heart of shared equity leadership is the notion of *personal journey toward critical consciousness*, in which leaders develop or strengthen a commitment to equity through their identity, personal experiences, or relationships and learning. Leaders’ personal journeys help them develop the *values* necessary to share leadership for equity, as well as carry out the *practices* that enact this type of leadership. These values and practices are embodied and enacted by leaders collectively.

This paper reports on the results of a multiple-case study of leaders at eight institutions that are experimenting with shared approaches to equity leadership. It reviews the details of SEL, provides several examples of what it looks like in practice, describes some emerging outcomes from the participating campuses, and offers recommendations for leaders interested in trying this approach.

# Introduction

Welcome to this first publication in our series On Shared Equity Leadership. The series will provide critical information for understanding, implementing and being successful in shared equity leadership. This paper focuses on defining shared equity leadership in the higher education setting.

In this paper, we describe the background that led to the study of shared leadership for equity. We highlight how decades of programmatic efforts and interventions have failed to make a difference in the success of racially minoritized, low-income, and first-generation students, whose populations are increasing on college campuses, and review the core concepts that undergirded the study—equity leadership and shared leadership. Then we introduce the phenomenon we identified at the intersection of those two ideas, which we have termed “shared equity leadership.” We briefly review our research questions and methodology before presenting our findings.

At the heart of shared equity leadership is the notion of a *personal journey toward critical consciousness*, in which leaders develop or strengthen a commitment to equity through identity, personal experiences, or relationships and learning. Leaders' personal journeys help them develop the *values* necessary to share leadership for equity, as well as carry out the *practices* necessary to enact this type of leadership. The paper concludes with some emerging outcomes from campuses using this approach to leadership, as well as recommendations for leaders who are interested in experimenting with shared equity leadership.

We collected the data that inform this report in 2020, a year of upheaval, visible racial and economic injustices due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and prominent episodes of police violence. These intense and complex challenges reinforced the need for shared equity leadership among our participants. Campus leaders recognized that they needed to move further and faster to promote racial equity on campus. Events of this year helped leaders both share equity leadership more broadly and accelerate their work, as equity became salient and urgent for far wider swaths of campus stakeholders than ever before. We hope that this report will help other leaders who are grappling with the most effective ways to lead around equity on their campuses.

## Background and Context

Twenty-first-century higher education institutions face numerous challenges pertaining to low-income, first-generation and racially minoritized student access, retention, and completion. The gap in graduation rates between students from the highest and lowest income quartiles has increased substantially since the 1990s (Cox 2016). For undergraduates in the United States who are both low-income and first-generation, the six-year graduation rate is only 21 percent, compared with 66 percent for students who are neither low-income nor first-generation (Cahalan et al. 2020). Additionally, the current 17 percentage point gap in college degree attainment rates between Black and White students is

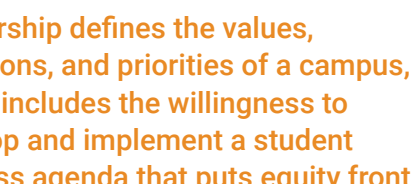
**Interventions to support minoritized students have not been successful at scale and often operate through a deficit mindset, placing the burden of change on students and communities rather than institutions.**



about the same as it was in 1990, while the gap between Latinx and White students has increased, even as the number of Black and Latinx matriculants has grown (Cox 2016; Fry 2011). While institutions employ a variety of interventions to support minoritized students, these efforts have not been successful at scale. They are often enacted through a deficit mindset, placing the burden of change on these students and communities rather than on institutions. Moreover, these efforts can be narrow, addressing discrete policies and practices that are disjointed and marginal, rather than interconnected and widespread. As a result, institutions are still enrolling and completing minoritized populations at rates lower than the national average (Espinosa et al. 2019; de Brey et al. 2019).

## Equity Leadership

A critical and necessary component to such transformation is the role of institutional leadership, including that of the college president. Leadership defines the values, directions, and priorities of a campus (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum 1989; Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin 2006). This includes establishing the willingness and ability to identify, develop, and implement a student success agenda that puts equity front and center. In the wake of the twin crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic/institutional racism, equity for students from underserved backgrounds is on the minds of college and university leaders more than ever. However, there are few guidelines for higher education leaders who want to make deep, meaningful, and lasting change to the policies, practices, and structures that promote inequity on their campuses and in the higher education system at large.



**Leadership defines the values, directions, and priorities of a campus, which includes the willingness to develop and implement a student success agenda that puts equity front and center.**

Increasingly, scholars such as Dowd and Bensimon (2015) have called for research into *equity-minded leadership* and the ways in which leaders across colleges and universities conceptualize and practice leadership in the face of challenging and complex diversity and equity imperatives. *Equity-mindedness* is conceptualized as being evidence-based, race-conscious, institutionally focused, systemically aware, and equity advancing (Dowd and Bensimon 2015). When practicing equity-mindedness, individuals question their own assumptions, recognize biases and stereotypes that harm student success, become accountable for the success of their students, and see closing racial and other gaps as their personal and institutional responsibility. Previous research in K–12 education has identified that equity-minded leaders can dismantle discriminatory policies, use data and assessment to understand inequity, and shift the consciousness of educators when it comes to awareness of discrimination and bias (Felix et al. 2015; Galloway and Ishimaru 2017; Niesche and Keddie 2011; Santamaría 2014). Equity-minded leaders pay attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes by different social identities like race, class, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion, and the systemic, historical, and political nature of such inequities. They work to promote awareness and understanding of inequities, dismantle discriminatory policies, and create institutional changes that promote more just and equitable outcomes for students.

However, there are few empirical studies of leadership for equity in higher education. Existing research on the role of presidents and top-level leaders in promoting diversity was conducted over a decade ago, when

“diversity agendas” were often focused on representational diversity and were less race-conscious (Kezar et al. 2008; Kezar 2007; Kezar 2008; Kezar and Eckel 2008). These studies examined how presidents promoted organizational learning, addressed the politics of diversity, and used aspects of transformational and transactional leadership styles to promote diversity agendas. Especially relevant for our study, these authors found that the most effective presidents pursue a web of strategies to promote equity, build networks of support across campus, and leverage horizontal leadership and collaboration among campus stakeholders (Kezar et al. 2008).

## Shared Leadership

Research indicates that complex challenges such as transforming institutions to become more equitable require shared or team leadership, which includes administrators at all levels, faculty, and staff (Kezar and Holcombe 2017; Pearce and Conger 2003). Shared leadership includes multiple stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, students) in agenda-setting and decision-making and can produce better outcomes for teams and organizations (Bass and Bass 2008; Bolden 2011; Kezar and Holcombe 2017; Pearce and Conger 2003; Zhu et al. 2018). Shared leadership is defined as moving away from the leader/follower binary; capitalizing on the importance of leaders throughout the organization, not just those in positions of authority, and creating an infrastructure so that organizations can benefit from the leadership of multiple people. Shared approaches to leadership capitalize on the broader knowledge of the institution and foster learning needed to advance equity.

**Transforming institutions to become more equitable requires shared leadership, which includes administrators, faculty, and staff in agenda-setting and decision-making and can produce better outcomes for organizations.**

Kezar and Holcombe’s (2017) review of literature on shared leadership found five key elements that characterize shared leadership. First, a greater number of individuals take on leadership roles than in traditional models. Second, leaders and followers are seen as interchangeable. In some cases, this may mean that leadership occurs on a flexible and emergent basis, while in others it rotates more formally. Third, leadership is not based on position or authority. Rather, individuals with the expertise and skills needed for solving the problem at hand are those that lead. To that end, multiple perspectives and expertise are capitalized on for problem solving, innovation, and change. And finally, collaboration and interactions across the organization are typically emphasized (Kezar and Holcombe 2017). Shared leadership is different from shared governance. Shared governance is based on the principles of faculty and administration having distinct areas of delegated authority and decision-making. Shared leadership, by contrast, is more flexible and identifies various individuals on campus with relevant expertise. This allows multiple perspectives rather than those of a single decision-making body—for example, only faculty or administration.

Shared leadership capitalizes on broad and on-the-ground expertise; decentralization and the promotion of local autonomy increase the adaptability of organizations and allow them to creatively and quickly respond to changing environmental conditions (Heifetz 1994; Wheatley 1999). In complexity and system leadership theories, team and collaborative leadership processes challenge organizations to look beyond individual skills and achievements and instead focus their energy on cultivating environments that emphasize interconnections, a shared vision for the future, and collective accomplishments.



While we went into our study planning to use the framework of “shared equity-minded leadership,” when leaders described their work, it was much more expansive. Leaders’ descriptions reflected an embodiment of equity, including personal journeys toward critical consciousness and a commitment to new values and practices, rather than a narrower focus on mindsets and beliefs. Additionally, as we delved deeper into the literature, it became clearer that equity-minded leadership has an orientation toward individual leaders whereas leaders in our study described their work as inextricably collective. We felt it was important to create a new term to capture this phenomenon and therefore developed the term “shared equity leadership” (SEL). In this report and in other papers in our series we will use this terminology or the synonym “shared leadership for equity.”

**Phase 1 of this project addressed the following research questions:**

- 1. What are the structures, functions, and characteristics of shared equity leadership within higher education?**
- 2. How does institutional context shape shared equity leadership?**
- 3. How do leadership groups navigate legal, political, and social environments to achieve their equitable outcomes?**

This paper will focus on answering the first research question by defining and elaborating on what shared equity leadership is and how it is practiced. Future reports will address findings from our other research questions, including different structures or models of shared equity leadership that we observed on different campuses, challenges that leaders faced when implementing this leadership approach, and how context shapes leaders’ and teams’ approaches.

## Study Overview

The project is a qualitative multiple-case study and involves two phases. Phase 1 was conducted in the first half of 2020. Phase 1 included interviews with 63 individuals such as presidents, provosts, deans, faculty, staff, and chief diversity officers who are known in the field as displaying and enacting shared equity leadership, and whose institutions have a strong track record of making progress on their equity goals. The sample of institutions and leaders was selected based on obtaining maximum variation by role, identity (including racial/ethnic, gender, and LGBTQ diversity), background and experience, institutional type (public and private research universities, regional comprehensive institutions, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and minority serving institutions), location (rural, urban, suburban), political context at the state level, and the ability or inability to use race-conscious policies. The institutions included in the study are Foothill College, Montana State University, Penn State-Abington, Rutgers University-Newark, Texas A&M University-San Antonio, University of Michigan, University of Richmond, and Westchester Community College. Despite the varied nature of institutions in our sample, our findings on what shared equity leadership looks like were consistent across institutions. In future reports, we will discuss ways in which SEL can vary based on institutional context, but the heart of the model we discuss here holds across multiple contexts.

For Phase 2, which is currently underway, we have chosen a subset of cases for further study based on what we learned from our Phase 1 interviews. Phase 2 will further explore differences in the roles that specific individuals play (e.g., student affairs staff versus faculty versus senior or divisional administration), investigate team formation and development, and dig deeper into each campus's shared or team structure. Focus groups, document analysis, observations, and some further interviewing will take place at case study sites. We will also explore some specific types of groups, such as leadership teams, cabinets, or task forces in an effort to understand differentiating factors between individual and group outcomes.

It is important to note again the unique context within which this study was (and continues to be) conducted. We began collecting data in February 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in earnest and colleges and universities, like much of the rest of the country, shut down and commenced virtual operations. We finished data collection for Phase 1 in June 2020, as protests against police violence and racial injustice commanded national attention and led many higher education leaders to grapple seriously with institutional legacies of racism and discrimination, as well as ongoing inequities on campus.

These significant events shaped the nature of our conversations with leaders in many ways, and we did our best to be flexible and responsive to events as they occurred. For example, we noticed that leaders we interviewed later in the spring and summer were describing ways in which the Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing protests had shaped their approaches to equity leadership—namely that it helped them accelerate their agendas and broadened the pool of potential participants in shared equity leadership as more people were paying attention to issues of racial equity. We also offered re-interviews or the opportunity to reflect in writing to leaders we had interviewed earlier in the spring; these leaders expressed similar sentiments about how current events had served as catalysts to move equity work further more quickly than they might otherwise have been able to. We are looking forward to exploring the ways in which the monumental events of this year continue to shape shared equity leadership on campuses in Phase 2 of our research. Now, we will describe the shared equity leadership approach in detail and provide examples of its different elements and how they play out in practice.

## What Is Shared Equity Leadership?

Shared equity leadership is inherently collaborative and inclusive. For that reason, as well as the many others described in this first report, we specifically examined groups or teams that were attempting to share leadership around equity issues. Equity leadership operates at both an individual and collective level simultaneously. When we discuss individual activities as being part of collectives and collective activities informing individual action, this may be challenging for leaders to understand initially, given predominant ways of thinking in this country about individuals as drivers of action in the world. Our data capture both individual and group values and practices, as well as group dynamics. We do our best in this section to honor the intersecting complexities of equity leadership and shared leadership, describing *both* how individuals operate as equity leaders *and* how teams or groups display equity leadership when they work together.

Equity leadership operates at both an individual and collective level simultaneously

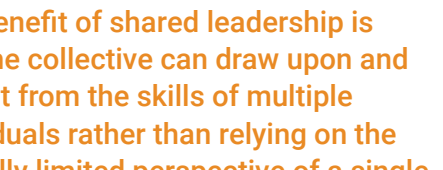
The shared equity leadership approach has three main elements: (1) individuals who have undergone some sort of *personal journey toward critical consciousness* or built a critical consciousness, cementing their commitment to equity; (2) *values* that are shared among members of the leadership team or group; and (3) a set of *practices* that leaders continually enact which both enable them to share leadership and to create more just and equitable conditions on their campuses. Shared equity leadership requires a *critical mass* of leaders who are undertaking a personal journey toward critical consciousness and who collectively embody the values and practices we describe. Readers will notice that there are quite a lot of values and practices involved in shared equity leadership. Every individual does not have to embody every value and practice we describe here—in fact, few, if any, of the leaders we interviewed are skilled in every one of these areas. Instead, when leaders work together in teams, or when leadership is distributed broadly throughout an organization, different individuals may bring expertise or skill in different areas. For example, one leader may be very comfortable being vulnerable and displaying humility but struggle with being uncomfortable when having conversations about race or difference. When working together as part of a shared equity leadership effort, these individuals can lean into their strengths and skills while also helping their colleagues develop in areas where they may have less facility. It is natural within organizations for these differences in strength, skill, and background to exist; shared equity leadership embraces these differences rather than assuming that everyone will eventually arrive at the same place or fit one particular way of thinking or behaving.

Foundational to the work of shared equity leadership is the notion of collaborating or working together to enact the campus's equity goals. Leaders of all levels, from presidents to cabinet members to faculty members and staff, described the importance of leading collaboratively. They stated that having different perspectives, experiences, and expertise at the table ultimately led to better decision-making, as this leader described:

“I don't think that—whatever someone's background, whatever population group an individual falls into, any individual can ever do [effective equity work]. I think that it also means a commitment to doing work collaboratively, because no matter what population group one's in, you know, there are things that are going to be salient to an individual, to you, that aren't

salient to other people and vice versa. And so I think that if you're really thinking seriously about an equity agenda you're also thinking seriously about a real kind of collaborative and communicative decision-making context. I don't think that those can *not* go together."

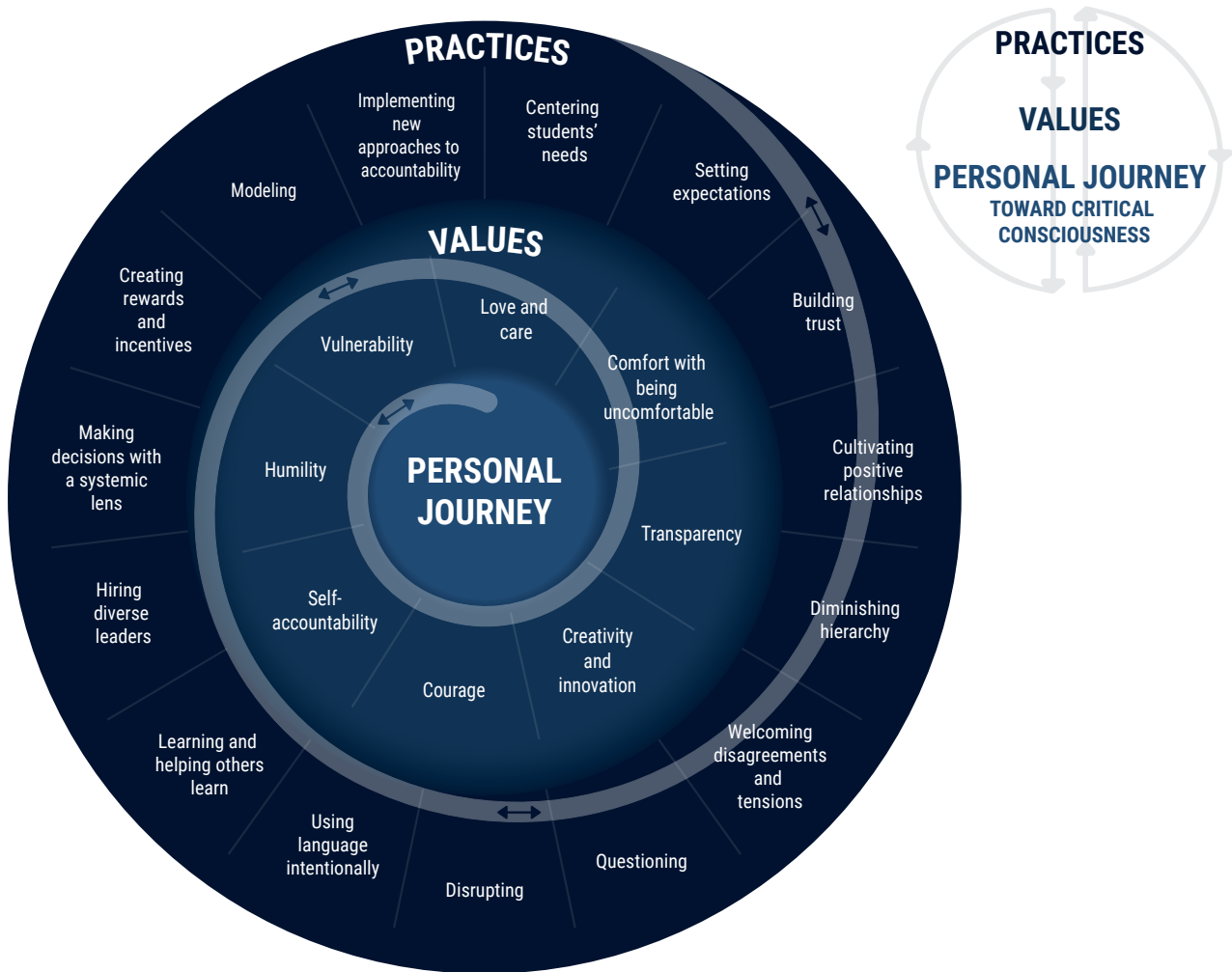
The benefit of team or shared leadership is that the collective can draw upon and benefit from the skills of multiple individuals, rather than relying on the typically limited and limiting perspective of a single individual leader. Leadership becomes widespread and institutional rather than limited and localized to one individual. A necessary element is a *critical mass* of people on the team or in the distributed leadership structure are undertaking a *personal journey toward critical consciousness*, who share *values* that promote equity, and understand and enact specific *practices* to promote more just and equitable outcomes. These three elements of shared equity leadership fit together in a sort of mutually reinforcing cycle, as depicted in the graphic below. In this paper, we describe the nuances and details of each of these three elements—personal journey, shared values, and practices—and provide several examples of what they look like in action, how they fit together, and how they interact with one another.



**The benefit of shared leadership is that the collective can draw upon and benefit from the skills of multiple individuals rather than relying on the typically limited perspective of a single individual leader.**



FIGURE 1: SHARED LEADERSHIP EQUITY MODEL



## Personal Journey Toward Critical Consciousness



Our findings highlighted that shared equity leadership requires a personal journey toward critical consciousness. This journey toward critical consciousness could occur in several different ways. Many campus leaders described how their personal experiences with exclusion and discrimination affected their commitment and passion to do equity leadership work. Others shared stories about their professional background, detailing years of training and learning that informed their desire to be social justice leaders. While each leader's story is unique to their personal and professional background and experiences, most leaders expressed a shared empathy and understanding for the work, making it personal for them. Many detailed how the journey of doing equity leadership work has transformed how they understand themselves, their students, and the inequitable institutions they hope to change. One campus leader reflected on advice she would provide fellow campus leaders wishing to practice shared equity leadership. She stated:

“It’s really important to be aware of this notion of transformation, because this is transformational work, but really to understand who you’re transforming, and you really have to start with yourself. That’s really important; it’s critical. I think when you come in with the ideas of “This is the way I see it,” you really have to make sure that you’re always reflecting on “Who am I transforming here?” ... So that’s where I say just be incredibly mindful of who’s transforming who.”



This leader's insight encapsulates nicely the concept of personal journey as a cornerstone of shared equity leadership. In order to effectively share leadership with others while promoting equity, individuals must do their own work of critically reflecting and developing a commitment to equity. To bring the idea of the personal journey to life for readers, we developed composite narratives<sup>1</sup> reflecting three distinctly different entry points or journeys. The differences in these narratives show how people from many disparate backgrounds and experiences can engage in the personal reflection and development that is critical for shared equity leadership.

## Equity Work Is Part of Who They Are

One common narrative emerged from participants who shared salient marginalized identities related to race, class, and first-generation college status. Participants explained that their equity work came from a very personal place as they recounted numerous raw experiences of exclusion or discrimination due to one or more of their marginalized identities while navigating inequitable institutions and systems. In order to illustrate this entry point clearly, we drew from multiple campus leader interviews and constructed the following composite narrative.

Liliana has been the director of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at Center City University for the past two years. Liliana's own experiences as a first-generation Latina in academe and growing up in a low-income agricultural immigrant community are inextricably intertwined with her professional commitment to equity. She recounts numerous personal experiences of the challenges she and her family encountered while navigating inequitable institutions. Her father was a migrant worker while her mother worked in a factory. Both had less than a high school level of education and spoke limited English when she was a child. Acting as a cultural broker at a very young age, Liliana assumed mature roles while helping her parents translate and navigate institutions in the U.S. She recalled many painful and uncomfortable experiences of both witnessing and being targeted for racism and discrimination.

The college application and selection process was one of the toughest times Liliana can recall. Her sights were set on the prestigious private college in her state, but she knew the high cost of tuition made it unattainable for her family. Even though she had her parents' support and the grades and test scores to meet the institution's average student profile, she was figuring it out on her own and had little knowledge about the college application process. Therefore, she attended the local community college. While working full time, she earned her associate degree after three years before transferring to the state flagship. At the state flagship institution, Liliana discovered and quickly enrolled in support programs for first-generation, low-income students. As an upperclassman, she both participated in and worked as a peer advisor for EOP. She felt empowered helping communities like her own. Her experience in this program revealed a world previously unknown to her. She realized she had missed out on many resources that she was qualified for but not aware of when they could have assisted her. This fueled her passion to create and improve access to educational opportunities to people like her.

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1 All names used in the composite narratives are pseudonyms, and institutions are pseudonymous as well.

Upon graduating, Liliana continued her professional career as an administrative assistant in the EOP office while simultaneously earning her graduate degree in higher education. She slowly climbed the ladder, working her way up to a director-level position (first as a coordinator then a counselor) over the course of 13 years. During that time, Liliana always went above and beyond to improve equity initiatives for the students she served. This work has always been personal to her. Her experiences of marginalization while attending predominantly White institutions give her a lens into what students have felt throughout their academic journeys and strengthened the commitment to equity she developed in childhood.

Distinctly different from the perspective of those in the other entry points we identify, these participants could not determine a particular point in time when they underwent personal transformation or developed a strong commitment to the work as it is part of their lived experience. Instead, they described an awakening around the discovery that they have been doing equity leadership work all along without realizing it. This work has always been personal to them. They expressed a strong sense of responsibility to change inequitable institutions and provide students like them with necessary support that they needed but did not have.

These participants expressed a *shared experience of prolonged marginalization* and a *strong conviction to change inequitable systems for those like them*. Given that everyday feelings of marginalization are a lived reality for them, these campus leaders *can directly relate to and understand their students and colleagues*. They are able to draw upon those lived experiences to further raise their critical consciousness, share expertise with colleagues, and inform their everyday practices.

## Equity Work Becomes Personal

A second common narrative emerged from participant interviews who *recalled a point in time, typically adulthood*, when the work became personal for them after *experiencing marginalization for the first time*. Most of the participants whose experiences fall under this narrative had *salient dominant identities in common* but were able to recall and detail one or two experiences when one of *their identities made them feel excluded*, leading them to reflect deeply on how others feel with salient marginalized identities. The following narrative illustrates a second entry point to this work that leaders exhibited.

Kristin has been working as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) at Palms University for the past seven years. A historian by training, she leads the University's largest college. As a leader, she has a strong commitment to social justice and equity for students in CAS. Kristin has worked with senior administrators at the university and faculty and staff within CAS to increase inclusion and belonging of students of color and first-generation college students in CAS's academic programs. They have also implemented many new programs and policies to better support these students, which have significantly closed racial gaps in persistence and completion. At the same time, they have meaningfully increased the number and proportion of tenure-track faculty of color within CAS.

Kristin, a White woman, grew up in the U.S. South with middle class parents who had never attended college. With little knowledge about college, Kristin decided to join the military after high school with the encouragement of her family. Kristin vividly recalls lying during

the military intake process about being gay, after being confronted about whether or not she had homosexual tendencies. She recounted the internal struggle she underwent while living through the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in the military, knowing all along that she was gay. It was this experience that made her extremely empathetic to people who feel marginalized. That experience of isolation and exclusion helped her to reflect on her childhood from a different and new perspective. Although she did not have the language then, she began to realize that she grew up in a racially segregated neighborhood that had many racist undertones and overtones. Her gay identity helped her to see the intersections of oppression and gave her an understanding that people’s differences should be acknowledged and respected. This sparked her desire to live a life of service to make the world a more equitable place. After four years in the military, Kristin went to college and focused her studies on understanding the intersections of race, class, and gender inequality in American history. She continued her academic interests in graduate school focusing on historic injustices and systemic inequities while beginning her professional career working in higher education as a faculty member and academic administrator.

About a decade ago, Kristin adopted an African child alongside her partner who is also White. Reaching this new personal milestone in her life and working to raise a Black daughter in the U.S., she began to recognize the limitations of what her academic training around equity could teach her. Her personal experience has made her more aware and thoughtful in her professional work.

In this example, the work became personal for Kristin when she experienced feelings of exclusion, isolation, and not belonging. She recounts painful memories of being targeted for discrimination due to her sexuality. This piqued her interest in and passion for equity work. Although she has extensive academic training via coursework and her professional background, Kristin identified two salient experiences at pivotal points of her personal development when the work became personal for her. Importantly, Kristin underscores how this process is ongoing—her years of training and the formation of her transracial family all contributed to her journey. In alignment with advice from equity leaders and literature, this narrative is a prime example of how participants saw themselves in the work, making it personal for them even if experiences of marginalization were not present all their lives. These participants reflected on all aspects of their identities to better understand themselves, their students, and the institutions the work within.

Although this narrative exhibits a personal entry into the work, it is distinctly different from the prior entry point. The first entry point involves prolonged or lifelong experiences of marginalization while this one includes those who have primarily dominant identities but can pinpoint one or two experiences of marginalization. Despite these nuances, both narratives included leaders who saw themselves in the work, making it personal for them.



## Personal Commitment to Equity Work Through Learning and Relationships

The third common narrative of personal journey toward critical consciousness encompasses participants who *may not have had a personal experience with marginalization* but instead *developed a personal commitment to equity work through learning and relationships with others*. There were *several ways that these participants entered the work*. One common entry point that leaders shared was *learning about the history and context of the institution and how it shapes access and equity for others*. Another entry point they underscored was *learning from others' lived experiences*. Hearing student, staff, and faculty's personal stories provided them with perspectives that diverged from their own and helped humanize the work. Finally, these leaders shared how crucial it is to *take responsibility to seek out and invest in learning opportunities that will help them better understand equity leadership work*. The following narrative reflects how a campus leader arrived at a more critical understanding of inequities on campus.

Ken was recently selected as vice chancellor of student affairs at Lakeside College, a predominantly White private liberal arts college in New England. Ken is a graduate of Lakeside and has spent nearly all of his career working there. Ken is White and grew up in a racially homogeneous and affluent town in the mid-Atlantic region, and had several family members who also graduated from Lakeside. As an undergraduate, Ken was a highly involved student and took advantage of an opportunity to be a resident assistant (RA). He greatly enjoyed this experience and worked as an RA for the final two years of his undergraduate career. Taking an interest in residential life and unsure of what he wanted to do long term, Ken worked at Lakeside as an assistant hall director upon graduating. Over the next 15 years, Ken worked in a few different student affairs roles at his alma mater and one other local institution and acquired a graduate degree along the way as his interest in student affairs leadership grew.



During his tenure working as director of student affairs at Lakeside, he was asked to incorporate and lead diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives after the institution adopted inclusive excellence as one of its primary values amidst its push to diversify the student body. Ken had taken a few workshops on diversity and inclusion and attended DEI leadership meetings over the course of his time in leadership roles. He knew he was no expert, but at this point he felt like he was doing DEI effectively.

When his longtime mentor and boss retired, Ken decided to apply for the position of vice chancellor of student affairs at Lakeside. After interviewing for and receiving the job, part of Ken's charge was to lead the development and implementation of a DEI strategic plan for the Division of Student Affairs. Immediately, Ken was confronted with many challenges given the growing diversity of the campus's student body and the complexity of his task. Although he was committed to equity, Ken quickly realized his previous DEI training was both limited and superficial, leaving him to feel severely underprepared for this new role. In order to be successful, he knew he needed to prioritize his personal development and invest in his own learning and understanding of the students and communities he now served. He embarked on a journey investing in numerous professional development and learning opportunities related to issues of DEI both within and outside of the institution (town halls, public forums, and trainings on implicit bias, campus climate, and microaggression, etc.). In these spaces, he had eye-opening and profound learning experiences as he listened to and learned from his students and trusted colleagues about their experiences with discrimination and prejudice on campus and beyond. He began to understand how students from different backgrounds might feel unwelcomed due to institutional barriers and hostile campus climates. Learning about the challenges of those he cared about only strengthened his personal commitment to equity. Recognizing how limited his experiences had been, he developed a more vested interest in unpacking his own identities using the literature and tools he'd engaged in his trainings. He also spent a lot of time learning about the college's history and its involvement in past traumas to the local indigenous communities. Ken took any opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversations with trusted colleagues while also collaborating with the institutional research office to make sense of disaggregated student data. After engaging in this process iteratively, he grew considerably and realized he better understood his own privilege and power. This allowed him to readily and confidently discuss DEI leadership and issues on campus. He acknowledges that he still does not have it all figured out but is much farther along in his own personal development than he was previously.

Ken exemplifies a leader who first entered the work professionally via a promotional opportunity with no explicit personal experiences of marginalization. Rather, he developed a personal commitment to the work by learning about experiences of discrimination and exclusion from those he cared for and trusted. He also furthered his understanding by learning about the institutional context, history, and student-level data. His critical consciousness was raised because he methodically and intentionally invested in the understanding of his own dominant identities and how they interact with marginalized identities and spaces. This journey strengthened his understanding of inequities and provided him new language and a skillset to better support his students and colleagues.

Importantly, this narrative highlights that a campus leader does not need to have experienced marginalization or discrimination firsthand in order to develop their critical consciousness. Instead, campus leaders can develop a strong personal commitment to the work through multiple entry points, including learning from others and engaging in various professional learning opportunities over time to better understand their own identities and inequitable structures and practices. Like in the second narrative, multiple entry points for those with dominant identities help to build empathy, a crucial component on the journey toward critical consciousness.

## Summary

Campus leaders committed to equity leadership work may begin their personal journey at varying points of their lives. While these three composite narratives present distinctly different journeys, they all represent similar critical understandings of structural and historical inequities and their role in creating change. We acknowledge that these narratives do not capture all entry points, nor are they meant to be exhaustive. Instead, we present these narratives to demonstrate how campus leaders with varying identities can participate in shared equity leadership effectively by developing critical thought and personal growth.

Our findings suggest how crucial the role of the collective is in the personal journey, as leaders will arrive to the work at varying points of consciousness. This is the primary reason for and one of the greatest benefits of a shared leadership approach to equity work. In the next section, we describe the shared values that are important for enacting shared equity leadership.

## Values for Shared Equity Leadership



“There’s a great book on *The Seven Acts of Courage*—just a simple management book, Dusty Staub is the author – and one of the acts of courage is for the leaders to be vulnerable and to love others. And I thought that was so weird, loving your teammates—what’s he talking about? But he says [paraphrasing], ‘You care enough about their development that you’ll allow some things to be vulnerable, so that their leadership can actually have some space to make errors, or to try things, or to be courageous and step out a little bit more.’ So those are, again, some of the principles that I have come to understand that have driven the way that I engage and enter some of our work.”

Equity leaders operate with a particular set of values that animate their work. Values are the beliefs and ideals that matter to individuals or groups. The values of shared equity leadership are developed through leaders’ personal experiences and commitment to equity, and cultivated and nurtured in their collaborative work with other leaders on the team. The above quote shows several different values that are crucial for equity leaders—love, vulnerability, courage, experimentation—which, along with several others, motivate leaders’ behaviors and actions. The values we include in this SEL model are not often associated with traditional forms of leadership —particularly love, vulnerability, humility, transparency, and being comfortable with being uncomfortable. In this section, we describe these values and offer examples of how the leaders in our study enact these values in their day-to-day work with others.

**Values are the beliefs and ideals that matter to individuals or groups.**

First, an ethic of **love and care** was noted as one of the most important values undergirding the work of SEL. As one participant noted, “Love is not all we need, but it is certainly what we must start with.” Leaders feel and display this love and care for those they are working with and for—students, faculty, staff, and community members. Many leaders spoke about the love they feel for their students and how they try to approach their relationships with fellow leaders, especially those with whom they disagree or who have different experiences, with a deep sense of caring and compassion. One leader spoke of this love for her colleagues as a “generous critical spirit”—giving people the benefit of the doubt and assuming they are coming from a good place but not being afraid to offer critical feedback or challenge them when you disagree. This ethic of love and care underscores the deeply personal nature of equity work and shared equity leadership.

Leaders also talked about the importance of **vulnerability** and opening up about difficult personal experiences or putting themselves out there even if they don't know exactly how they will be received. Often these vulnerable experiences were around race or other aspects of identity and were very painful for leaders to share. Many participants mentioned experiences of either allowing themselves to be vulnerable or being with others who made themselves vulnerable, and just how powerful that was in terms of building connection and trust. One faculty member spoke of this experience at an equity professional development session, where participants began sharing their personal experiences with racism and discrimination:

“To have people in the meeting become human and shed tears and break down and have all of these moments—you can, I think, better understand that, okay, if they are going through this and they are like, 30, 40, 50, 60 years old, I can imagine there must be students who had the same experiences, but just don't vocalize them.”

Being vulnerable and sharing personal experiences can help faculty and staff build connections and trust with one another, but it also can help them start to better understand students' perspectives and experiences, as the above quote shows.

Entering the work with a spirit of **humility** was another important value that leaders discussed. They described humility as understanding that you don't have all the answers or solutions and that your experience isn't everyone's experience. Some participants spoke about humility as honoring and respecting others' experiences and knowledge:

“It ... broke open this way to have conversations about things that we don't know and things that we don't understand, where I don't have all the answers. So that, I think, has really helped me build a lot of credibility with people in, ‘What can you teach me? You're the subject matter expert. What can I learn from you, because we're all in this together?’”

Others spoke about showing humility in admitting when you have done something wrong or when something has not worked well. For example, one president spoke of a challenge in setting up shared leadership structures that conflicted with existing formal shared governance cultures and norms on campus. This leader described their willingness to admit they made a mistake and how that went over with the faculty on campus:

“The leader, I think, being willing to have that humility to say, ‘Okay, that was the wrong way. Can we try again? Let's get a mulligan here and do over...’ They could've said, ‘No, that was not good,’ but they were very



appreciative, and I think not even used to that kind of ... ego subordination, but it just wasn't working, so we needed to stop."

Leaders also spoke about the importance of **courage**, standing up for equity and remaining dedicated even when it's not popular or easy. They noted that equity work often goes against the status quo and means changing long-standing ways of doing things in the face of resistance or skepticism. For example, one leader remarked that people "have to be brave and [think about] what does it mean to critically reassess your past and current practices and be willing to change them when things catch you off guard." Another described the specific courage required to stick to equity priorities in the midst of a rapid shift to online teaching and learning in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic:

"It seems rather mundane, but it is the choice of a leader to know where her space is, to know where her platform is, and to be courageous and say something, [even if] she knows her faculty and staff may be [saying], 'Oh my God, I am so stressed out. I have to make my classes 100 percent virtual, and then you're asking me to do equity work?' Which is already hard in any normal day, right? But I went there. I went there, and I said ... 'I recognize that I'm asking a lot of you in a very stressful time.' So that's just to point out what seems simple requires a lot of, 'You gotta do it.'"

**Transparency** was another important value for shared equity leadership—being honest, clear, and open about decision-making and about success and challenges in doing this work. Some participants described intentionally increasing transparency in specific areas, such as the budget process, to show campus stakeholders the criteria they were using to ensure equitable allocation of funding, for example, or about how they were making decisions in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others spoke about being transparent with the campus community about their beliefs, such as speaking out about racial justice issues or persecution of undocumented immigrants or police violence against Black men.

Additionally, leaders remarked that they had to develop **comfort with being uncomfortable** in order to effectively lead. They noted that equity work can be really uncomfortable, especially when talking about race, and that it is important to be able to just sit with that discomfort and be okay with it:

"Racial equity has to be spoken [about] with comfort, with a level of expertise and an ability to bring it, and when one talks about race it gets everyone uncomfortable. I mean the research has shown it, right? People are uncomfortable. It is the one thing—until recently with this new President [Trump], it's the one thing you don't talk about at dinner. It's the one thing you don't talk about at Thanksgiving. It's the one thing you don't talk about with friends, because everyone will cramp up. Nowadays, it's whether you're a Democrat or Republican, too .... As a leader we have to be very comfortable [with discomfort] and really push the envelope."

In addition to being comfortable speaking about uncomfortable topics, leaders sometimes have to be willing to just sit with the emotions and pain of students and community members in uncomfortable situations rather than immediately trying to jump to finding solutions. For example, one institution in our study (like so many across the country) faced a series of racist incidents. The leadership team struggled with the best way to respond to these painful violations. Originally, some of the campus's most senior leaders planned to give a

statement and lead a group meeting in response to discuss the steps the institution was taking to ensure this would not happen again. Other members of the leadership team pointed out that this approach was not ideal and that the leadership team had to get comfortable with the discomfort and pain of the situation rather than trying to solve it:

“I would say the three of us plus some, you know, allies who appeared were able to say that is actually the worst you could possibly do in this moment. Like nobody wants these two White guys to get up there and tell them how good the institution is and how sincere it is. And that the vulnerable thing, what we need to do is, is you all need to be there and be visible standing in the mess with people trying to—listening to what people have to say and demonstrating and really taking in what you’re hearing in its fullness and its scope and just being in the mess.”

Leaders at other institutions also spoke of the power of being uncomfortable to fuel self-reflection and change: “The discomfort is the good part about this because she was bothered. And that’s a good thing. And she did something about it.”

This idea of discomfort fueling change also relates to the idea of **self-accountability**—holding yourself accountable for doing the work and getting results as well as for learning about equity, continuing to challenge your preconceived notions, and being willing to change your beliefs and practices as you continue to learn and grow:

“I guess the other [important] piece [of leadership for me] is just sort of remaining up to date on equity issues and being consistently interested in growing my knowledge around that, or sharpening up my tools. Going back to the basics and reminding myself of what I’ve learned, what has changed since I’ve learned where my knowledge has grown in that space, and just ... being constantly curious about that.”

Leaders spoke of the importance of a spirit of **creativity and innovation**, both in performing equity work and in leading it in a collaborative or shared manner. They pointed out that no one has truly solved the problem of inequity in higher education before, that there are no universally agreed-upon ways of doing this work, and that shared leadership approaches are still relatively new and untested in higher education. Therefore, an environment that values and rewards creativity and innovation is crucial for success:

“I think that the idea of experimenting is what really, for me, inspiring about what the senior leadership has done ... that they’re able, they were willing to take the risk, to try something different, knowing very well that not one model really fits the university. We were not interested in a CDO; that wasn’t working. What the university was doing great was that there was a lot of programming going on, but none of these programs were synchronizing into one shared vision.”

Creativity and innovation, like the other values described in this section, undergirds the practices that members of equity leadership teams use when working together.

## Practices for Shared Equity Leadership



In addition to the values that leaders hold, they also enact particular practices that embody shared equity leadership. By practices, we mean the ongoing, regular activities that leaders perform both individually and collectively in order to accomplish their equity goals. In our interviews, we found a wide variety of practices that equity leaders enact. In this section, we describe the 15 practices we identified as comprising the regular work of shared equity leadership. We want to emphasize again that groups do not need to perform each and every one of these practices in order to effectively share leadership for equity. Rather, these practices can be seen as a menu of options from which leaders can select the combination that works best for their context and their group of leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Practices are the ongoing, regular activities that leaders perform both individually and collectively in order to accomplish their equity goals.

In order to lead together effectively, the equity leadership groups we studied employed a mosaic of practices to accomplish their goals. The first practice that helped leaders share equity work was **centering students' needs** when having discussions and making decisions. In some cases, leaders would reframe discussions to focus on what a “student-centered” decision would be or to think about all the different ways that students could

2 In the next phase of our research, we hope to learn more about whether some selection of these practices might be necessary or required for effective shared equity leadership. Our existing data do not indicate whether some practices might be more important than others, so the order of the practices in the text does not indicate a ranking of importance.

be impacted by a particular decision. In other cases, leadership teams built formal structures to get student feedback and input on decisions, as this leader noted:

“Student advisory boards, diverse student advisory boards for every unit where students are actually holding the units accountable and engaging in the work that they are doing in providing advisory counsel on the work we’re doing in terms of its relevance and so that they’re influencing policy and practices.”

Leaders also mentioned the importance of **setting expectations for the long term** in order to help others understand certain realities of the work. One of the most prominent realities mentioned was the timing of equity work, especially equity work that is led in a shared or collaborative manner. Leaders mentioned repeatedly that this work takes time—institutions are not going to transform to be more equitable overnight. Participants described how they had to set that expectation up front with other members of their leadership teams, the broader campus community, and board members and other stakeholders. They were intentional about helping to change people’s expectations from a quick-fix mentality or searching for a single silver-bullet solution to an understanding of the larger systemic changes necessary to make institutions more equitable—which take time to enact. Helping colleagues understand that reality made for less frustration and conflict in times when it seemed like change was slow to come.

**Building trust** among members of the team was another important practice for enacting shared equity leadership. Our participants noted that in order to lead with others around issues of equity, you must build trust with them (through sharing and embodying the above values like humility and vulnerability) and build strong working and personal relationships. One leader described how building trust among members of the leadership team was foundational to the more actionable equity work they wanted to accomplish:

“I think one of the things that we realized is that we couldn’t do any of the pragmatic work that needed to happen, or logistical work that needed to happen with [our leadership group] until we really established this foundation of trust. Our main role I would say the first three months was making sure we had some type of level of trust within the members in our group, which, some of them had never met before, or some of them knew of each other, but [had] never worked together. It was really how could this [group] trust each other, knowing very well that they [each] had their own DEI experience and expertise.”

Several leaders mentioned the extra challenge (and extra importance) of building trust across difference. One way to build trust is **cultivating positive relationships** among members of the team in more informal settings, as one president described:

“For a little bit of fun, every December, at the end of our commencement ceremony [in the morning]...I invite everybody at 3:00 p.m. to come to my home, bring a dish, and we have the most monumental Christmas, holiday, Kwanzaa celebration that you can imagine. They bring their spouses. Everybody explains what they cooked. It’s usually something very exotic. We go out of our comfort zones and we explain. It’s a good opportunity for us just to—you know, hair goes down and we interact with each other.”



These opportunities to build relationships outside of meetings or formal professional settings helped leaders learn to trust each other. Some leaders also spoke about strong personal relationships and a certain level of trust as capital they could draw upon when advocating for a particular equitable policy or decision in their area. For example, one student affairs leader described how she leveraged the goodwill she had built with other members of her team to advocate more forcefully for certain types of high-touch support programs for students. She emphasized the trust that other leaders had in her as a key reason why they were open to entertaining and ultimately accepting her proposal.

Leaders described the importance of **diminishing hierarchy** and power differentials so all perspectives can be heard. While some teams had leaders with similar levels of positional or formal authority, others featured team members with different positions in the organizational hierarchy—for example a faculty member and a provost on the same team. While leaders without positional authority, such as faculty members, noted the importance of diminishing hierarchy so that they could feel comfortable challenging senior leaders, senior leaders like presidents spoke about specific actions they took to minimize power differentials. Some of these actions were as seemingly simple as having people sit in a circle instead of at a table with a “head” or in rows:

“When we used to meet in person we always formed a circle. I remember I mentioned this to another friend of mine, who is also [a] president. I had an opportunity to attend one of her meetings and they were sitting in different parts of the office. I said, ‘Guys, first of all, you need to stand up. Everybody needs to stand up. There’s power in the circle.’”

In addition to supporting those leaders with positions lower in the formal hierarchy, minimizing power differentials also served to promote greater equity for leaders from minoritized backgrounds whose voices might otherwise be dismissed, diminished, or overlooked. Other actions included a senior leader volunteering to take on a less prestigious service role in a meeting instead of having someone more junior do so. For example, one cabinet-level leader described how she adopted the role of note taker in a group composed of mostly faculty and non-senior leaders:

“I take all the notes at the meetings because [others] are facilitating, which is exhausting. We don't have an admin to that group. So I take all the notes. I think it's showing a level of care and distribution that's important and that everyone needs to pitch in.”

These strategies helped positional leaders flatten the hierarchies within their leadership teams and ensure greater equity among the members of the shared leadership group.

Another important practice was **welcoming disagreements and tensions and unpacking them respectfully**, or creating an environment where disagreement is productive and dealt with openly. Disagreements and tensions are an inevitable part of doing equity work, as people with different experiences and identities may have different opinions on how to accomplish equity goals, or even on what goals should be. These disagreements can be compounded in a shared or team leadership environment, where multiple leaders are trying to work together to make decisions. Leaders described the importance of disagreeing respectfully and on normalizing disagreement and conflict among their teams:

“The other [important thing] would be [creating] the safe place, and this links back to having diversity of perspectives and social identities at the table, the promoting a culture of robust dialogue . . . [and a] safe space for pushback. Being able to throw a red flag. Rewarding a diversity of opinions.”

Sometimes hierarchical leaders had to explicitly state that they welcome and encourage disagreement and pushback and that they did not want their voice and opinions to dominate:

“But the most important thing, at the beginning there was a lot of silence and waiting for them to read the cues from me. I had to verbalize my expectations and I said, ‘It's okay if we are not all always on the same page. We need to hear it. We need to debate. Debate is good.’ But then once we reach consensus, all I'm asking is we don't revisit that issue. We just move forward as a team.”

Leaders also described the process of respectfully managing debate and disagreement in how they received feedback and criticism. For example, one leader described the value of dialogue across difference and described how he looked for opportunities to create events or debates between people with opposing viewpoints to model how respectful dialogue can occur. These sorts of facilitation skills were critical both in the process of sharing leadership and in the process of navigating complex equity challenges.

Another practice that leaders used with one another was **questioning**—specifically, asking questions about taken-for-granted practices. Leaders often asked questions because they genuinely did not know the answers and wanted to find solutions or help guide others to find solutions:

“I do that a lot. I'm like okay, here's the issue at hand. What is your proposal? It's not just enough to say this is where we are, just throw your hands up. I do not believe in that. We have to come up with a solution . . . it may not be perfect, but we need a solution that then provides a different kind of avenue for our students, faculty, and staff. And so we think about how I

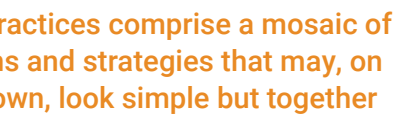
lead. I ask a lot of questions and say, 'If this were you, what would you want to happen? And/or how do you think we can get this done?'"

Others used questioning as a strategy to gently guide their colleagues to question dominant practices and policies. One leader mentioned frequently asking others questions like "Well, can you clarify that?" or, "What did you mean by that?" to help colleagues dig deeply into their assumptions.

Some team members went a step further than questioning and began intentionally **disrupting** traditional norms or ways of thinking and operating to point out inequities or problems. Often team members who played a disrupter role were consciously bringing their own lived experiences or the views and experiences of minoritized or underrepresented students to the conversation:

"I like to challenge the existing norms.... And sometimes I guess I'm a disrupter.... I just want to try to show a different view from the other side of the table, maybe, that people don't always understand."

It is important to note that disruption was a strategy that was best employed by only one or a couple of members of a team at a time in order to drive home particular points and ensure that marginalized voices were not being silenced.<sup>3</sup> Every team member could not be a disrupter, or else nothing would be accomplished, but it is crucial to have someone enacting this practice so that important issues get raised. This is a great example of how these practices comprise a mosaic of actions and strategies that may, on their own, look simple but together make up a picture that is larger than the sum of its parts. The practices are used by different members of the team at different times, with some practices being more appropriate in particular circumstances or for particular team members (e.g., diminishing hierarchy and presidents) and others being more universal (e.g., building trust and relationships).



The practices comprise a mosaic of actions and strategies that may, on their own, look simple but together make up a picture that is larger than the sum of its parts.

A number of different practices related to **using language intentionally and communicating openly** came up repeatedly throughout our interviews. First, leaders noted the importance of being explicit and naming race issues or other equity challenges rather than speaking elliptically or merely alluding to challenges in more coded language. Second, they talked about equity frequently and publicly to emphasize its importance, as this leader described:

"Because equity is such an important part of [our agenda] we try to choose—we try as much as we can in every way to tell stories that reflect that agenda, not necessarily to the exclusion of other things.... Even when we tell other stories that aren't obviously related to an equity agenda, we try to make it clear that this is a part of our agenda. I think I have a particularly important role in advancing this because it signals to not just internally but especially externally what our—who we think we are and why we think equity is important."

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3 The practice of "disrupting" has similarities to the "critic" role on a leadership team that Bensimon and Neumann (1993) identified in their study of presidential cabinets: "The Critic raises issues that others may take for granted or prefer not to acknowledge. The Critic also encourages the team to recognize the differences, rifts, and oppositions that are nearly always embedded in myths of consensus...." (Bensimon and Neumann 1993, 65).





Third, they intentionally used language that was asset-focused instead of deficit-based and encouraged others to do the same, as this leader described:

“We are constantly fighting battles, and I do this every day, to try to fight battles on the rhetorical front to keep my colleagues ... from sliding into this deficit model of talking about high-need students or students from diverse backgrounds, that it’s not just nice and it’s not just good; it’s actually essential and you get better work out of diverse groups.”

Fourth, they used different language to frame their work for different audiences in order to more effectively garner support. For example, one leader described how he frames their campus’s DEI strategic plan for his president as similar to a fundraising campaign, with specific goals and outcomes for a specified time period but always the underlying need to raise money (or do equity work) even outside of the confines of a particular giving campaign. This example resonated strongly with his president, as fundraising is often a top presidential responsibility. However, he might frame the work differently for faculty members or other academics, for whom a fundraising campaign analogy would be less compelling.

Like language and communication, leaders described a number of practices related to **learning and helping others learn** that were critical to the work of shared equity leadership. They described four different ways of *learning* about equity and about leadership. First, they learned by listening, specifically to others’ stories of their lived experiences, as this president described:

“That meant working with my leadership team to understand the lived experiences of our students and helping our staff and our faculty within the division understand the lived experiences of our students as well so that they cultivated the kind of empathy and patience to help students and to meet students where they were.”



Second, they learned about bigger-picture equity gaps by looking at data; facts and figures helped them put people's stories and lived experiences into a broader context. For example, several leaders described how they and their colleagues had not realized the ways in which a particular policy that did not seem racist on the surface could have a disproportionate impact on students of color until they saw racially disaggregated data on student outcomes. Third, leaders learned formally through professional development sessions on topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. And fourth, they learned informally through reading or discussions with colleagues. This ongoing learning helped leaders stay in touch with the most pressing equity issues on their campuses and also facilitated their ongoing transformation and reflexivity.

Equally important for teams, leaders also described how they *helped others learn*. They described coaching or teaching their colleagues, and the strategies they employed were often the inverse of the strategies they used to learn themselves. First, leaders shared personal stories or lived experiences, whether it was their own perspective as a member of a marginalized group, their own journey to becoming an equity leader, or others' experiences, as in this example:

“When I go to department meetings or if I'm at an equity meeting or a meeting with colleagues and that topic comes up, I can remind them of the importance of stepping back and looking at the bigger picture. For example, a colleague just said to me last week she was disappointed that when she learned that another colleague who works with students, didn't finish his master's degree. So I have to kind of let her know, well, you look at his personal story, you can understand why. So she saw that after I explained you can't apply this cookie-cutter template on everybody. You have to kind of understand people's different experiences. I'm hoping that equity came through with that conversation, is what I'm trying to say there.”

Second, leaders marshaled data to draw their colleagues' attention to inequities by looking at numbers. They noted that sometimes this approach resonated with colleagues from different academic cultures, such as scientists who rely heavily on data and numbers and for whom stories were not always enough to spur action. Third, they sought out and sometimes facilitated professional development sessions about equity or about specific leadership skills. And fourth, they created environments where colleagues could learn from one another informally.

Leaders also described their experiences **making decisions with a systemic lens**, looking for ways to connect or build up pockets of existing work, going beyond “random acts of equity” to make sure that there is a cohesive approach to the work, and embedding equity into every facet of the institution. One leader described this systemic lens and how it makes their approach different from traditional approaches to equity work:

“The idea of moving beyond random acts of equity—because there's a lot of random acts of equity. There are a lot of faculty, there are a lot of staff, there are a lot of administrators really doing equity in their pocket in their way. And what our team is trying to bring via the plan is making it strategic. So we have to change at the system level, we have to change at the cultural level, we have to change at the individual level and helping guide those conversations so that folks see where the efforts that they're already engaged

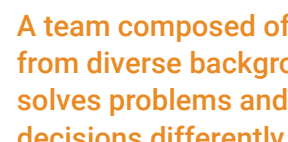
in fit in that bigger strategy and the pieces of the bigger strategy that need to happen that no one's doing.”

As this leader noted, one key way that leaders used this systemic lens was to *build up or connect pockets of existing work*. Leaders from other institutions referred to this idea as “boundary-spanning,” or looking across units and divisions to make connections. Another leader whose formal role was fairly senior described having the “institutional altitude” to see all the various pockets of equity work and help bring them together. Another way that leaders were able to create systemic change was by *embedding equity in everything*, or looking for ways to make equity unavoidable. This looked like finding little opportunities to build equity in even when it might not traditionally be there. For example, one institution was committed to working with local businesses when conducting university functions; given the composition of the local community, these businesses were often owned by people of color. When the leadership team ordered breakfast or lunch for their meetings they made sure to order from these restaurants that were locally owned. Even a small decision like where to order food was made with an equity lens. Another institution had a robust history of professional development on campus; the leadership team decided to capitalize on the professional development programming and made every single professional development opportunity about equity. In this way, every faculty and staff member who participated in professional development was getting exposure to important equity concepts, which helped build a broader cadre of people across campus who supported equity goals.

Additionally, **hiring diverse leaders** as a part of the leadership team or collective was a critical practice for shared equity leadership. Diverse leaders bring different life experiences and perspectives to leadership roles and help teams excel toward their mission and goals. One leader described how their team has benefited from being more racially diverse:

“The university has never had teams that were so diverse. And it's showing in terms of the way that the conversations go. When we talk about algorithms of social justice and what that means. That would never have happened under previous regimes. It would only ever come up with people sort of in our liberal approach to transformation and change, the liberal aspect would come out. ‘Well, what can we do to help these people?’ But now, we have these people quote-unquote at the table in the chairs. And they are delivering on an equity approach that is unprecedented. And so all the deans, or the senior team, there, I think, is only two White people out of the—there's three White people out of the 17 total senior leadership team. Everybody else is Black and Brown. That's unusual.”

Nearly every participant we interviewed discussed the importance of hiring leaders from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, as well as those who were low-income or first-generation college students, or LGBTQ+, in order to better represent the diversity and complexity of their student body. But also, as the leader quoted above touches on, a team composed of leaders from diverse backgrounds solves problems and makes decisions differently than a team that lacks diversity. The complexities inherent in solving equity challenges at a broad or systemic level benefit from the perspectives of people who are different from one another and bring different ideas and experiences to the table.



**A team composed of leaders from diverse backgrounds solves problems and makes decisions differently than a team that lacks diversity.**

Leaders also worked on **creating rewards and incentives** for doing equity work. While this practice was more emergent and still unfolding at many places, leaders noted the importance of rewarding equity work in the same way that research or other types of leadership are rewarded on campus. One institution was experimenting with formally dedicating portions of faculty members' time (also known as their full-time equivalent or FTE) to equity work. Another campus ties unit budgets to achievement of DEI goals and builds in rewards for equity work in the faculty review process. A third institution provides seed grants for faculty and staff who want to experiment with an equity-oriented project or research project. And a fourth campus provides professional development credits for faculty who participate in equity-related professional development opportunities both on and off campus.

Similarly, leaders experimented with **implementing new approaches to accountability** in the context of shared equity leadership. While self-accountability was an important shared value, equity leaders also enacted new practices around accountability as they worked to hold one another accountable as a collective and make progress on their equity goals. Some of these approaches to accountability were more informal. One leader described holding her colleagues accountable for their words and actions in a respectful and consistent way:

“I also see it as holding my colleagues accountable—that’s the other side of it—in a respectful, professional way, of course. I’m not yelling at anyone or anything like that. But at the same time, speaking up when we are—like no one’s immune to it, we all fall into these sort of things—these ‘isms.’ We fall into them sometimes, and unfortunately, they’re hard for us to all completely avoid. But I do think that making sure we hold each other accountable for not just the way we talk about these things, but also more importantly the practices and engagement with students and each other. So for me, equity-mindedness is practice-heavy, rather than just being simply you just have to teach this course, and you solve the issues of equity in our institution. But you have to be willing to allow those things to permeate all aspects of your professionalism.”

Leaders also created more formal accountability structures, such as formal goals and outcomes in strategic plans or DEI plans. These goals, like other institutional goals, were explicit and measurable, could be either attached to specific units or cross-cutting, and ranged from targeting increased representational diversity to improving campus racial climate to improving learning about equity for faculty, staff, and students. Some campuses also assigned formal responsibility for different aspects of equity to particular roles or people, as this leader described:

“Each vice president had a certain number of goals that they were—for which they were responsible. And now as part of the president’s cabinet ... each vice president is able to at appropriate times talk about the progress they’re making towards their goal.”

By ascribing specific equity goals to several specific senior cabinet-level leaders and not just a chief diversity officer, this institution was able to spread responsibility and more effectively share leadership for equity. While clear metrics and clear lines of responsibility were important aspects of new accountability practices, some leaders described a more wholesale reimagining of what accountability should mean in the context of equity work and a more collective approach to leadership, as this participant noted:

“I think that’s a really ongoing conversation. I think what we definitely are against is this managerial version of accountability, where there’s somebody counting how many things have you done. That’s not the accountability that we’re really thinking about. I think the accountability that we’re thinking about is more like how . . . one unit could have the capacity to do more DEI work just because of what they’re focused on. It’s not about how much, but it’s how you’re interweaving it into your mission, or vision, or year plan. I think those are the types of conversations that we’re interested in having is, ‘How are you thinking about it?’ If you’re not, let’s talk about how we can. What are the microsteps that you can take to begin this conversation because for those that are not in it, it’s scary. So, it’s not about how much but okay, what’s the entry point into it? I think it’s really finding that entry point for those that are not necessarily involved in this work.”

This leader described a desire for more holistic and qualitative approach to accountability for equity work that several other participants also mentioned. While none of our interviewees had fully figured out what that would look like, we are excited to continue learning from them as they work through it collectively.

Finally, **modeling** was a crucial practice that often undergirded many of the others we described in this section. For example, leaders modeled how to use language intentionally and clearly in their conversations with colleagues or the college community at large. They modeled how to create spaces for respectful dialogues and disagreements, and they modeled how to hold one another accountable. One leader described how she modeled ways to diminish hierarchy for her colleagues in decision-making:

“And then modeling, and this one gets messy and it’s difficult but a non-hierarchical approach to the work so being more egalitarian in how decisions are made when possible, right? Good leadership also needs to be directive at times but there are times when you don’t need consensus and then actually it’s inappropriate to try and gain consensus. But reserving that more directive or authority approach or hierarchical approach for the case appropriate moment and more often than not being planful and flexible and creative to ensure a more egalitarian nonhierarchical approach.”

Other leaders also described how they intentionally modeled equity values in their leadership practice, from how decisions get made (e.g., by consensus or by fiat, as the above quote describes), to thinking about who is at the table when making decisions, whose voices are heard, and how to empower people with the tools and skills to make important decisions. Participants spoke about the power of their colleagues modeling these new ways of leading and how it gave them confidence to join in the shared leadership effort and faith that true equitable change was possible.



## Connection and Interplay Among Elements of Shared Equity Leadership

We have described the three major elements of shared equity leadership—personal journey toward critical consciousness, values, and practices—as well as three entry points to the personal journey, eight values that leaders embody, and 15 practices that leaders enact in order to share leadership for equity. We recognize the complexity of this model and are mindful of the potential of so many components to overwhelm leaders who may otherwise be interested in trying out this approach. We want to reiterate that the values and practices are a menu of options rather than a set of requirements for leaders. Leadership teams on each campus we studied did not display every practice or value that we included as a part of the model of SEL. Rather, leaders enacted these elements in different ways depending on a wide range of factors, from their campus or state contexts to the individuals on their teams to their student populations.

**The values and practices are a menu of options rather than a set of requirements for leaders.**

Additionally, the elements are not static and separate, nor are they part of a linear process with discrete steps. While some sort of personal transformation or critical consciousness is generally necessary for leaders who engage in shared equity leadership, the values and practices are all connected and interact with one another in a mutually reinforcing way. And even with personal transformation, leaders can engage in practices that promote the personal journey toward critical consciousness among their colleagues on campus. We will provide a couple of examples of this interplay before showing what one set of values and practices might look like in action in the next section.

First, learning (*practice*) can facilitate the *personal journey toward critical consciousness*. Indeed, one entry point to the personal journey was through learning about others' experiences or learning about inequities more generally. For example, one leader in our study described how her eyes were opened to the complexity of student experiences after learning more about the types of students attending their institution at a professional development session hosted by the institutional research (IR) office. This new knowledge spurred her to learn from students themselves about their lived experiences and was a key pivot point on her journey to personal transformation and eventual engagement in shared equity leadership. Another example of this connection or interplay we observed is how leaders' *personal journeys* can foster love and care (*value*). Once leaders understand inequities and develop a deep commitment to supporting marginalized populations in seeking equity and justice, they also develop a strong sense of care for the people they are working with and for. One leader described how her understanding of students' experiences and the ways in which they are similar to her own upbringing inspires a deep sense of love and a fierce sense of caring for her students. Additionally, vulnerability (*value*) both encourages leaders on their *personal journeys* and helps leaders build trust among one another (*practice*). As leaders open up about their identities and experiences, they can inspire others to grapple with their own identities and experiences and facilitate their development of critical consciousness. This vulnerability can also build trust among leaders as they open themselves up to one another and put themselves out there.

## Shared Equity Leadership— Values and Practices in Action

Now, we put these pieces of shared equity leadership together to show how a team or leadership group might collectively enact them. This vignette describes a composite fictional university's experience with shared equity leadership, with examples drawn from the actual universities we studied. These examples do not go into great detail on the personal journey aspect of the model, as we shared several narrative examples of that element earlier in the chapter.

At Palms University, the primary team leading around campus equity goals is a group of senior leaders informally called the “Brain Trust.” Convened by the university's president, Bianca, the Brain Trust is composed of the eight members of the president's cabinet, as well as deans of the university's six colleges, the head of institutional research, and the president of the faculty senate. When Bianca started her presidency at Palms in 2014, nearly all of the senior leaders were White and about three-quarters of them were male. Over her first three years Bianca was able to make several new cabinet-level hires, as well as replace half of the university's deans. She was able to fill nearly all of those positions with people of color, and she increased the proportion of female leaders so there is now gender parity among campus leadership (*hiring diverse leaders*). The composition of the senior leadership team was critical to Bianca because she is committed to a shared leadership approach, especially around issues of equity.

Bianca felt strongly that up-front work to build trust among members of the Brain Trust was critical for the team's future success (*building trust*). She worked to build that trust by first noting that she needed the expertise of everyone in the room because her perspective as president of the university limited her from seeing all the issues and barriers that students may face (*humility*). She also opened up and shared her own experiences with equity work and as a woman of color in a leadership position (*vulnerability, modeling*). The entire group also attended a two-day retreat during which they got to know each other better and had formal professional development sessions on how to share leadership and what it means to be an equity leader. Additionally, Bianca brought the Courageous Conversations About Race training to campus and had the Brain Trust attend, in addition to any other faculty and staff who were interested (*learning and helping others learn*). Bianca also hosts potluck dinners at her house for the team once per semester and encourages everyone to bring a dish that is special to them, their families, or heritage (*cultivating positive relationships*).

As a result of the strong relationships the team members have built, trust is high and members are willing to speak their minds and challenge one another when they disagree about something. For example, the provost proposed a policy that would prevent students from retaking a course that they had already failed three times, noting that there was a small group of students getting stuck trying to pass the same courses and not being successful. She brought data indicating that about 50 percent of students who fail a course the first time pass it the second time, and another 30 percent pass after taking it the third time. But almost no students passed after taking a course and failing it three times. The provost argued that it wasn't right for the institution to keep taking students' money and letting them continue to take the course with a very limited chance of success. While most of the team members agreed with the policy, the vice president for student affairs (VPSA) advocated strongly for not adopting the policy unless it had a provision for providing academic support after a

first failure. The VPSA is often the member of the team who challenges the team to think about students who are being negatively impacted by various policies and problematizes existing ways of thinking and operating (questioning, disrupting). Another member of the team (the chief of staff) is more of a consensus-builder and tried to get the VPSA to change his mind and vote for the policy's adoption. The VPSA responded with, "I'm going to vote against this policy and that's going to be okay. If one of us votes against this policy that's okay because we need this kind of disagreement among ourselves to hash out what is best for students" (*welcoming disagreements and tensions and unpacking them respectfully*). Ultimately, while the policy at issue was adopted, the VPSA and provost worked together to expand their existing tutoring and supplemental instruction programs to specifically support students who had failed and were retaking a course.

The Brain Trust meets weekly and in each meeting discusses progress on equity goals, as well as concerns or challenges to equity that they or their own teams have uncovered. From the beginning of their time together, Bianca has modeled what this process looks like, and other leaders have followed suit (*modeling*). For example, the chief financial officer (CFO) surfaced a financial aid policy that she feared was leading to an inequitable distribution of funds away from students who needed them most. Essentially this policy was a "first-come, first-served" policy, in which the pool of institutional aid was distributed according to the order in which students submitted their financial aid documentation. As a result, students who were slower in filling out their financial aid forms—often those with less support for completing college-related tasks or those with complex family situations—ended up getting less aid. After bringing up this concern at a meeting, the CFO worked with the institutional research director to compare various demographic characteristics of students who filed their financial aid paperwork earlier versus later. As she had feared, students who filed later were from lower-income families, represented a larger proportion of foster youth, and tended to be from racially minoritized populations more than the university population at large. After bringing the results of this analysis back to the Brain Trust, the team worked together to change the policy for the upcoming academic year.

The team does not believe that hiring a chief diversity officer or creating an Office of DEI is the right way to execute Palms University's equity goals, as they want everyone to feel like they have an important and meaningful stake in accomplishing the university's equity goals. Though their shared leadership model is not the typical approach to DEI work, the team feels that their approach is helping them achieve their goals in a deeper and more meaningful way (*creativity and innovation*). Various members of the Brain Trust are officially responsible for different equity goals laid out in the university's strategic plan, and the group works together to monitor progress, hold each other accountable, and make progress on the goals that cut across divisions and departments (*implementing new approaches to accountability*). The team has also worked on identifying all the pockets of equity work happening in various divisions across campus, and they are now figuring out ways to connect these existing programs and services to streamline and amplify their impact (*making decisions with a systemic lens*).



## Outcomes of Shared Equity Leadership

The three elements of shared equity leadership we identify—personal journey, values, and practices—complement one another to create a new model of leadership for colleges and universities that are serious about dismantling inequitable structures and creating more just and equitable outcomes for students on their campuses. In this section, we describe a variety of outcomes that campuses practicing shared equity leadership experienced, ranging from more equitable campus policies and practices to hiring more diverse faculty, staff and administrators to scaling interventions.

One of the ultimate goals of shared equity leadership is to dismantle inequitable structures and policies.<sup>4</sup> In practice, this means examining normal or taken-for-granted ways of operating to determine whether they might be hindering the campus's equity goals. These policies and structures could be as seemingly mundane as the requirement for a physical signature on an application form as opposed to a virtual form. For example, one school found that the requirement they had for a physical registration form for a particular program made it very difficult for part-time or online-only students to complete registration; these students also tended to be from lower-income backgrounds and were disproportionately students of color. The leadership team decided to add a virtual option for completing the form in order to remove this barrier for students. A leader at a different institution described a financial aid policy that was harming students' ability to persist in school, called a "no-pay delete," in which students had their schedules wiped if they had failed to pay tuition by a certain date. This leader described how she worked with other leaders on the team to help them understand why the policy was a barrier to equity:

"So every now and then we encounter where people come at something from their place of privilege and they aren't coming at it from a place of empathy and understanding, and one of the things that I would say to him over and over was, 'You've bought a car, right? When you bought that car someone sat down with you, even though you have a master's degree, an MBA, but someone sat down with you and talked to you about how to finance that car.' We don't—we're not doing that here. We need to be doing that with our students. Because we're just telling them this is how much you owe, this is your financial aid, oh, you don't have enough financial aid to meet this tuition bill, go figure it out and do it by this date. And that felt wrong to me. And so being as that policy was in another division it was really an uphill climb, but we're starting to get people to look at those policies and look at those practices and think about how they affect our students and their ability to access education."

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4 Given the nature of our study design we are unable to suggest causal linkages between shared equity leadership and either student or institutional outcomes, yet individuals interviewed described numerous ways they perceived that SEL was helping them accomplish their equity goals.



Conversations like this one laid the groundwork for teams to identify and dismantle policies that prevented the equitable outcomes they hoped to achieve. We found numerous examples of specific policies and structures that leadership teams determined were hindering equity and changed as a result.

In addition to changing policies and structures, leaders at the institutions we studied noted several additional indicators as evidence that their approach was improving equity on campus. The evidence below is based on leaders' perspectives of the connections between shared equity leadership and accomplishing equity goals and is not a fully inclusive list but provides several of the key indicators.

First, campuses were able to scale interventions and supports in a manner that had not happened prior to the distribution of leadership. For example, one community college overhauled its advising and support structures to implement a case management approach. The program started as a pilot but scaled to provide elements of that support to nearly all students, and transfer and graduation rates increased meaningfully as a result. The president's approach to leadership and expansion of the team working on equity issues made the scaling of this program possible, as leaders across campus were already prioritizing equity in their decision-making and planning. Once the team saw initial results from the pilot, they were able to quickly bring others across the college together to plan for how to scale the program.

Leaders also indicated that they have increased hiring of faculty and staff of color as well as other types of diversity (e.g., more LGBTQ, more first-generation). They also described diversifying their leadership cabinets. There is a strong body of existing research evidence that having faculty and staff who identify as being from similar backgrounds to students promotes improved success rates for students of racially minoritized or other marginalized identities (Museus and Neville 2012; Museus, Yi, and Saelua 2017).

Additionally, more faculty, staff, and administrators on campus are participating in professional development, which is seen as central to closing equity gaps. Interviewees indicated that professional development was now the norm at their campuses with regular involvement and skill development around key areas important for advancing inclusion and diversity work from understanding the needs of particular student populations like first-generation or racially minoritized, managing difficult conversations, or culturally responsive pedagogies.

Having multiple leaders working together to think about how to improve equity generated major innovations and structural changes that better supported students. One example is the Honors Living and Learning Program for first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students at Rutgers-Newark, which has helped boost the success of these populations on their campus. This program redefined the meaning of what an honors student is and involved changes to admissions, financial aid, residence life, advising, pedagogy, and curriculum. It required the leadership and participation of people from many divisions and units across campus to make these changes and would not have been possible without the group of leaders working together to both conceptualize the program and to make it happen.

Leaders also described how a shared approach to equity leadership made them more adept at handling racial crises on campus or in the wider community, as they had a broader set of individuals with greater connections to students and community helping to make decisions about how to respond. One institution's leaders noted how much more effectively they felt they had navigated a racist incident on their campus after distributing leadership on their campus. While the incident was of course painful and disruptive, students felt supported and seen in their response to the incident in a way they had not in the past, and leaders felt that their understanding of students' reactions was stronger and more authentic as well.

Campuses indicated that cross-unit work and collaboration had also become normative and allowed for smoother implementation of innovations, easier scale of best practices, and the sharing of information and knowledge across boundaries that helped improve the work of other offices—for example, the career center being able to work with the multicultural center in ways they had not in the past.

In the end, the engagement in professional development, more diverse faculty and staff, decision-making being governed by an equity mindset, having a greater critical mass of leaders focused on equity, and greater capacity around doing the work diversity, equity, and inclusion led to an entirely different campus climate and culture. Campuses offered up evidence of climate surveys of not only of students but also faculty and staff indicating that the climate has improved since implementing the shared equity leadership approach. Many of the interviewees describe the changes in climate that results from having so many additional skilled and committed people working collaboratively and focused on issues of equity.

These outcomes reflect important changes to institutional structures, policies, and practices that are necessary for promoting meaningful changes in student outcomes. Understanding the full effects of this work will take time, as it reflects a fundamental shift in the ways we operate in higher education. Nearly all of the institutions we studied are early in their trajectory of leading in this manner. The longest time that an institution has had a shared equity leadership structure in place is five years; most of the campuses we studied have only been working this way for a year or so. But all the indicators above are strong reflections that the campuses are making meaningful changes and are well on their way to closing achievement gaps.

# Recommendations

While we plan to publish additional tools and resources for leaders who are interested in implementing a shared equity leadership approach, we wanted to provide some initial recommendations that emerged from our study:

- **Thoughtfully and carefully select a diverse set of leaders to participate in the shared equity leadership effort.**
  - Ensure that the leadership team represents a broad cross-section of offices, divisions, and positions within the organizational hierarchy, as well as diversity across racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, and religious boundaries.
  - Sometimes the most effective equity leaders may emerge from unexpected places, such as the library, community engagement or government relations offices, business or financial aid, and performing arts faculty and staff.
- **Carefully orient and socialize the team to shared equity leadership.**
  - Ensure that leaders have a common understanding of how the shared leadership approach will function in practice—i.e., decision-making, deliberation, authority and responsibility, resources, communication, etc.
- **Provide and require ongoing training.**
  - Provide and require ongoing training addressing topics of implicit bias, race and racism, power, privilege and oppression for all campus leaders. This will ensure that leaders prioritize the internal work necessary for the personal journey toward critical consciousness. Additionally, professional development may be needed to help leaders learn how to work together and share leadership effectively.
- **Create spaces that support leaders' personal journeys.**
  - Provide spaces where leaders can engage with all campus members and share and understand personal experiences with power, privilege and oppression. These conversations will encourage leaders to be reflexive.
- **Openly discuss and model values.**
  - Discuss and model values in meetings and gatherings with other leaders. For instance, in team meetings, it may be helpful for a leader to reflect on decisions that had an inequitable outcome and what they learned (*humility*) or to discuss their own experiences with discrimination or inequity (*vulnerability*), or to sit in discomfort when something is difficult rather than trying to immediately jump to a solution (*comfort with being uncomfortable*).
- **Make data accessible and understandable.**
  - Make institutional data accessible to all campus leaders. Provide opportunities that will help leaders break down and understand the data so that they can build it into their respective equity goals and plans with their teams.

- **Be transparent about institutional history.**
  - Create accessible ways for leaders to learn about the institutional history. Be transparent and honest about historic trauma the institution took part in against marginalized communities. Acknowledge the current institutional context and practices that may still uphold systemic racism and oppression against others.
- **Make equity leadership commonplace.**
  - Host multiple events, forums, and presentations on topics of equity and leadership. This will send a symbolic message to the campus community that equity is a priority for the institution while also provided multiple learning opportunities for leaders.
- **Reflect on context.**
  - Reflect on how institutional, local, and state context shape both equity goals and leadership approaches. For example, a large and decentralized institution will likely need a highly structured and formalized distributed leadership model, whereas a smaller or less decentralized campus may have success with a team of leaders working together more informally. Consider also how the political and legal environment may inform who should participate—for example, some teams would benefit from having someone from the general counsel's office involved, or even a local community member or politician.
- **Engage with emotions.**
  - Acknowledge that equity work is inherently emotion-laden and can be difficult and painful for many people. Honor and make space for leaders to share their emotions and pay attention to who is bearing the burden of the emotional labor involved in the work.
- **Be flexible and creative with accountability and measures of success.**
  - Leaders will likely need to rethink their traditional notions of accountability when deciding how to measure success in a shared equity leadership context. Some sort of accountability for equity must be built in for each leader who is involved, whether officially in performance reviews, in strategic plans, or some other fashion.
  - Leaders should also be thoughtful about what success means in the context of their equity work. Is it something that can be easily quantified, and/or do they need to consider more qualitative, holistic ways of defining success?
- **Incentivize and reward the work.**
  - Participation in shared equity leadership should be recognized and rewarded, especially for more junior leaders, leaders of color, and women who are often asked to perform this work uncompensated and unrecognized. Examples of how this could be rewarded include formally designating a portion of faculty or staff members' time for equity work, tying department budgets to equity goals, or incentivizing or compensating faculty and staff for participation in equity-related professional development.

## Conclusion

Over the last few decades, many campuses have worked tirelessly to better support students from diverse backgrounds. In that time, a number of experts including Kezar (2019) have observed that while higher education has added programs and services “on the side” to address the changes in student body, a substantial and holistic rethinking of the core functions and practices of campuses has not yet occurred. Such rethinking, however, is imperative in higher education today. What the research points to is the need for culture change—a process that can only occur through shared equity leadership, with leaders across campus working together and sharing the unique insights of their positions, experiences, and identities. If leaders are focused on equitable student success, they can shepherd their institutions to prioritize, engage and alter the structures, policies and practices so that they support all students. In addition, leaders can provide the motivation and incentives to reshape faculty and staff work.

Yet, to date, there has been virtually no research, projects, or support for a *focus on campus leadership as a strategy for change within higher education*—much less a focus on the specific type of shared leadership necessary to promote equity. This is the first major project to document the specifics of shared equity leadership by articulating the constellation of personal journey, values, and practices that leaders embody and share to promote more just and equitable outcomes for students, faculty, and staff. We look forward to sharing additional insights from our work in future papers in this series.

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## Appendix: Methodology

The overall study from which this report is drawn involves two phases. This report focuses on Phase 1, which included interviews with 63 individuals such as presidents, provosts, deans, faculty, staff, and chief diversity officers known in the field as displaying and enacting shared equity leadership, and whose institutions have a strong track record of closing equity gaps. For Phase 2, which is currently underway, we have chosen a subset of cases for further study based on what we learned from our Phase 1 interviews. Phase 2 will have two primary aims: to further explore differences in the roles that specific individuals play (e.g., student affairs staff versus faculty versus senior or divisional administration) and to dig deeper into each campus's shared or team structure. We also want to follow up on how campuses created their shared equity leadership structures, as well as any lessons that can be learned from building them. We will also more deeply explore institutional context and challenges to enacting SEL. Focus groups, document analysis, and some further interviewing will take place at case study sites. We will also explore some specific types of groups, such as leadership teams, cabinets, or task forces in an effort to understand differentiating factors between individual and group outcomes.

### Case Selection

We identified campuses for inclusion in the study through several criteria. First, we looked for evidence that leaders had improved the success and outcomes of diverse students on their campuses, with an emphasis on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. A primary source of potential interviewees was nominees and winners of ACE's Reginald Wilson Diversity Leadership Award. The award is presented annually to an individual who has made outstanding contributions to diversity in American higher education. We further sought input from ACE's Women's Network, former members of ACE's Commission on Diversity and Inclusion, and leadership in peer associations such as the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. We also obtained input from our project advisory board of experts on equity and leadership in order to end up with the eight institutions chosen for the study. The institutions included in the study are Foothill College, Montana State University, Penn State-Abington, Rutgers University-Newark, Texas A&M University-San Antonio, University of Michigan, University of Richmond, and Westchester Community College. Interviews with leaders at these institutions explored the research questions across a host of individuals at very different institutions and in very different roles to provide maximum variation sampling and findings.

### Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with leadership teams at eight institutions representing different institutional types, contexts, and regions that allow us to learn more about shared equity leadership. The study team interviewed five to eight individuals on each team for a total of 63 interviews. We interviewed the presidents at each institution, and then the group that they identified as key individuals working on their equity agenda. This varied from one institution to another—at one institution it was primarily the cabinet, at

another it was individuals throughout different colleges and divisions, at others it included a combination of DEI-specific employees as well as mainline administrators, faculty, and staff.

The Phase 1 interview protocol was developed with the input of our project advisory board and designed to explore individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and actions specifically aimed at improving educational equity, as well as their work with other leaders. The interviews were generally 60 minutes in length, took place via phone, and were recorded. Prior to the interviews, the research team conducted extensive document analysis of each interviewee's institution to contextualize our understanding of the environment in which the leader was situated. All interviews were transcribed for analytic purposes. We analyzed data using Boyatzis (1998) thematic analysis. This approach uses both inductive and deductive approaches to analysis. Using inductive analysis, we identified themes that emerged in the data. Using deductive analysis, we explored themes from the reviewed literature, including from the K–12 and higher education sectors, with special attention to the foundational work conducted by Dowd and Bensimon (2015).

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