DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION VS. SOCIAL JUSTICE POSITIONING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTIFYING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES THAT SERVE BOTH THE INSTITUTION AND SOCIETY

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education has expanded over the last half-century, but inequities still exist. This study explored the attitudes and motivations of twelve DEI professionals at six universities using in-depth qualitative interviews to learn what drives their use of social justice-oriented approaches as an alternative to traditional DEI practices to effect change in higher education. The study investigated how practitioners define DEI and social justice and whether both types of approaches are successful toward achieving DEI goals. An examination of drawbacks, conflicts, and institutional barriers revealed impacts on the application of these approaches. In addition, the study examined communication methods to understand how to position DEI and social justice practices effectively. Findings indicated that differences in approach were not related to individual DEI practitioners as much as institutional factors and suggested that DEI communicators draw from the co-orientation model as a “multi-partial” positioning strategy.
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INTRODUCTION

During the U.S. presidential election cycle of 2016, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) communicators in higher education entered an era of increased messaging and activity. The election and its lead-up of constant news and social media attention spurred a succession of events that sent communicators running to compose statements on behalf of their institutions, messaging that attempted to acknowledge, ameliorate, or declaim a series of perceived threats to higher education. Examples included President Trump’s highly-charged victory (Hacker, 2016), the restriction of the travel of persons to the U.S. from several countries (Brown & Najmabadi, 2017), the dismantling of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (Adams, 2017), legislation restricting the rights of LGBT individuals (Henkel, 2016), and revisions to Title IX (Brown, 2019)—events that caused enough distress among affected groups within higher education institutions to call for public responses from universities. The contentious media climate erupted into real life protests and rioting after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May of 2020, possibly exacerbated by the frustrations and inequities of the global COVID-19 pandemic that began just months before. Having already ramped up communication efforts in recent years, universities across the nation responded to the unrest that affected their campuses (Bartlett, 2021). College presidents issued statements promising new initiatives, action steps, and reforms in what some called a “watershed moment” for change (Bartlett, 2021).

With this activity comes the recognition that higher education institutions, while perhaps not in possession of the power to change governmental mandates or determine the course of national events, do have the power to lessen inequities on their campuses and influence change that affects thousands of students, faculty, staff, and other interactors within their spheres and beyond. How are these institutions using their influence, and are they using it effectively? Research in the fields of communication and education shows that despite progress in the area of DEI in higher education since the Civil Rights Movement, some DEI practices may have little effect on the problems they attempt to address. Examining the past and current trajectory of DEI positioning within higher education suggests that we look to current
research in social justice and communication to conceive of ways to effectively promote change in higher education institutions, especially considering that digital media has increased the speed of communication as well as its possibilities.

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of DEI professionals at higher education institutions in the state of North Carolina conducted in the fall of 2021. In-depth interviews explored the motivations, observations, and perspectives of these practitioners to investigate how well traditional DEI practices and social justice practices contribute toward achieving the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The discussion concludes with an analysis of how DEI communicators in higher education might use these insights to better position their institutions as change-makers.

BACKGROUND

DEI Efforts in Higher Education

History and Purpose. It is useful to look at the 50-year span between 1968-2018 to assess the establishment and growth of diversity initiatives in higher education from the Civil Rights Movement to the present day. Student activism and demands for change in the 1960s and 1970s led to the establishment of culture centers and minority affairs offices to handle diversity issues, but these efforts were usually staffed by lower-level positions and not well supported by universities (Patton, Sanchez, Mac, & Stewart, 2019). While the scholarship exploring existing DEI initiatives at that time is “lacking at best,” activity has increased over the past twenty years (Patton, et al., 2019, p. 173). Developments in the 1980s and 1990s included the appointment of higher-level administrators to foster diversity initiatives and improve campus climate. In addition, institutions began to implement diversity education requirements for students, inspired by the Multicultural Education movement (Banks, 1994). Despite the increased dedication of resources to diversity initiatives since that time, Patton, et al. (2019) found that “ultimately, the most sobering aspect of the findings is that the initiatives that were studied did not significantly differ
DEI Leadership and Functions. With the advent of the role of the chief diversity officer (CDO) in higher education, diversity initiatives now have the attention of university leaders, with a 2017 survey of 81 CDOs indicating that 40% have a seat at the executive table, reporting to the president, chancellor, or CEO, and 21% report to the provost (Bendici, 2017). However, the same survey indicated that only 16% said their institution had a clear DEI plan in place when they started in their role (Bendici, 2017), pointing to the lack of an established history across institutions. In a study of effective leadership of CDOs in higher education, Adseria, Charleston, and Jackson (2016) acknowledged the wide range of responsibilities of DEI leaders along with the challenges and hurdles they face, particularly when guiding institutions in “seeking to align policies and practices with their stated commitments to diversity” (p. 328). CDOs are expected to make university cultures more inclusive and equitable by leading initiatives within institutions that are often change-resistant and siloed (Adseria, et al., 2016).

Within this difficult mandate, Barnhardt, Mollet, Phillips, Young, and Sheets (2018) studied university leaders’ public advocacy and found that those who advocated for values such as moral and ethical conduct and valuing diverse perspectives “operated as a positive resource for improving the campus climate for diversity” (p. 2), with notable examples of leaders who have spoken out to advocate for community members from marginalized groups, often in opposition to external pressures. One such example occurred after the 2016 presidential election and before the end of DACA, when nearly 600 college presidents signed a statement in support of their undocumented students; similar letters addressed harassment, hate, and violence and expressed support for international students and scholars after the travel ban (Barnhardt, et al., 2018). However, Barnhardt, et al. (2018) also found that “these examples demonstrate that senior campus leaders speak out and advocate publicly for a variety of issues related to diversity and inclusion on campus, yet little is known about the impact of these administrators’ actions on the larger campus climate” (p. 3).
Traditional DEI Messaging. One common task of the CDO is to help formulate and deliver an institutional diversity statement. As a highly visible and foundational piece of institutional policy and messaging, the diversity statement is a fairly recent phenomenon. Randall (2014) cites studies from 2006 and 2007 that found that few academic institutions had formalized diversity policy or support into a statement (as cited from Iverson, 2007) and that 78 out of 300 colleges and universities did not mention diversity as a primary element of their missions (as cited from Morphew & Hartley, 2006) despite contemporary studies indicating the benefits to an academic institution in terms of academic and social outcomes when diversity is explicitly addressed (p. 941).

Additional prominent pieces of DEI messaging studied by researchers are institutional non-discrimination statements and position announcements for new university presidents. Rozado and Atkins (2018) studied the statements of fifty U.S. universities and found them overwhelmingly to claim to embrace diversity in their mission and diversity statements. Even though they bemoaned a “disparity in representation of political opinion within the academy” (p. 297), they agreed that “diversity statements serve the role of crucial public relations instrument” (p. 298). Meyer and Wilson (2012) suggested that position announcements for new presidents should reflect “best practices in forwarding the diversity agenda for institutions” and noted also that an institution reveals its commitment to diversity through its website (p. 91).

It is important to consider that the content analyses in this review come from studies of institutional websites, which could provide an incomplete picture. While Wilson and Meyer (2012) agree that “institutional websites have been termed the ‘virtual face’ of higher education, and examination of websites is a growing area of research” (p. 94), they found that “institutional websites may not capture all of an institution’s efforts towards diversity, nor its commitment to diversity, nor its accomplishments” (p.103).

While this review focuses on U.S institutions, it should be noted that the institutionalization of diversity outreach occupies the minds of international researchers as well. Buenestado-Fernández,
Álvarez-Castillo, González-González, and Espino-Díaz (2019) studied 127 universities worldwide and found that American and Canadian universities appear to have made more progress in terms of diversity-related information published on institutional websites, most likely due to the history of equal opportunity advocacy in these countries, but issues of diversity outreach have also emerged recently in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

**Perceived Failings of Traditional DEI Messaging.** Not everyone is sanguine about the results of DEI efforts in higher education. Scarritt (2019) examined university documents and found that predominantly white U.S. universities use diversity mainly as an advertising tool, expressing commitments to diversity as a branding strategy and focusing on the profitability of diversity instead of positioning it as a moral imperative. Here, we begin to see an important differentiation between DEI messaging and the social justice viewpoints that Scarritt (2019) observed as running counter to the model of a marketable diversity, which views talking about race, in some cases, as “anti-humanist hostility, unjustly prioritizing one form of diversity above another” (p. 190). This problem is not endemic to the U.S.; Rhoads and Ilano (2014) observed that the quest for global rankings has pushed higher education institutions to prioritize characteristics favorable to the international marketplace, where higher education is a commodity. They hold that the rankings tend to reinforce preexisting, elitist hierarchies, only motivating institutions to prioritize social responsibilities if they factor into the ranking formulas. Economic pressure favors research universities and institutional behaviors that are “not necessarily oriented to serving students” but rather those that increase an institution’s wealth and the power of its brand (Rhoads & Ilano, 2014, p. 32). The authors hold that such forces do not align with higher education’s mission to serve the public good; they suggest a new ranking scheme that better reflects measures of social justice (Rhoads & Ilano, 2014).

Examining messaging released after the end of DACA, Squire, Nicolazzo, and Perez (2019) studied individual institutional statements and found them ineffectual. At face value, the statements appeared to affirm students’ right to a U.S. education at their institutions but failed to provide or even
suggest a course of action. The study revealed a predictable template of inaction in response to an injustice that threatened the well-being of students and concluded with the finding that most of the institutions fell into a pattern of being “unwilling to address systemic oppression” (Squire, et al., 2019, p.113), typically focusing on individual incidents, and noted that university presidents merely “used their statements to publicly recommit to diversity initiatives, proclamations about which there was little to no accountability” (Squire, et al., 2019, p. 113). These findings foreshadowed scathing critiques such as one from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published in June 2020—one month after the killing of George Floyd—that would call higher education’s fight against racism “at best, superficial, and at worst, cynical” (England & Purcell, 2020, para 1). The article, written by two Black professors at Carnegie Mellon University, dissects the many ways in which their university and others fell short in their institutional statements after the killing, from a lack of acknowledgement of the problem of police brutality, a failure to place recent events in the contexts of underrepresentation and structural racism, and even the use of passive voice to avoid placing blame (England & Purcell, 2020).

But the failings do not end with ineffectual messaging. Squire, et al. (2019) criticized the creation of the role of chief diversity officer itself as “an institutional practice of absorption,” meaning that institutions create the position as a box to be checked but don’t hold the office accountable for performative action. Another obstacle for chief diversity officers, particularly in public institutions, are conflicts between DEI and free expression. Lambe (2020) investigated diversity officers’ experiences as they led DEI efforts while obliged to respect First Amendment protections and academic freedom. Recent challenges such as “buildings that are named for slave-owning historical figures, disinvitations of controversial speakers, protests for racial justice, white supremacists posting flyers, and Zoom-bombing incidents” present threats to the inclusive environments that institutions attempt to cultivate but may not rise to the level of a violation of law or institutional policy (Lambe, 2020, p. 1). In a survey of members of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, 175 respondents provided information about their institutional roles and relationships. Emerging themes included the need for
diversity officers to engage in every institutional conversation pertaining to DEI; the need for a persuasive and relational approach to move institutions beyond solely legal responses to addressing the potential harms of protected speech; the need to work closely with institutional leaders; the need to facilitate constant ongoing intergroup dialogues at their institutions; and the need to facilitate a “multi-partial” (rather than impartial) manner of working that acknowledges that some viewpoints reinforce power and privilege while others counter it (Lambe, 2020, p. 3). Lambe (2020) also notes that DEI officers must employ subtlety and savvy to get people to “recognize problematic ideologies and call attention to them” while negotiating complex dynamics to do their jobs effectively. The article highlights respondents’ concern that institutional statements “tend to be ‘more about public image and legality than about care’” (Lambe, 2020).

Simmons and Wahl (2016) use a communication education research perspective to look at how communication educators define DEI. They observed that diversity has a “problematic ubiquity” (p. 234) that can be reduced to “a superficial manifestation of potentially stereotypical gestures and exchanges” (as cited from Carr and Lund, 2009) and inclusion connotes a power differential because one group must choose to include a less powerful group. They state that DEI in communication education “runs the same unproductive risk of faltering to the failures of diversity and inclusion programs on college and university campuses” (Simmons & Wahl, 2016, p. 234).

A 2020 analysis of how higher education institutions respond to diversity-related incidents uses critical race theory (CRT), a movement from legal studies that “centers the role of power in producing and sustaining racism and hegemony” (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 491), as a conceptual framework. CRT scholars hold that racism is a “permanent, systemic, and endemic force” (Thornton, et al., 2020, p. 154) that only provides rights and privileges to marginalized groups when doing so will not disrupt the privileges of the dominant group, perpetuating itself unless explicitly named and challenged through the centering of counternarratives (Thornton, et al., 2020). In CRT, traditional ideas of inclusion have little effect against a system that works to preserve existing inequities. The authors analyzed the responses of
university administrators to several major recent events, including racial tensions at the University of Missouri in 2015, #BlackLivesMatter activity, and the decisions of some campuses to become sanctuaries to protect immigrant students from deportation in the wake of the elimination of DACA. The authors point out that nothing less than disruption—not policy-making or mollifying statements—can dismantle systemic oppression, racial violence, and educational inequity; anything less is “complicit in injustice” and likely ineffectual (Thornton, et al., 2020, p. 157).

How can higher education institutions overcome these perceived failings? One study suggests that communication in the forms of policies, outreach, admissions, online learning and access, and retention can play a major role (Salmi & D’Addio, 2020). However, outreach to increase access and inclusion does not necessarily improve outcomes unless accompanied by measures to support students once they are enrolled (Salmi & D’Addio, 2020). The authors do not explicitly discuss systemic deficits but suggest that “there is a strong need to understand better where the disparities characterizing higher education come from and which policies are more effective in reducing inequality” within a given institution (Salmi & D’Addio, 2020, p. 21).

Thus far, this review has included mostly quantitative and critical studies that examine DEI functions from an external perspective, including historical developments, social movements, and broad changes across institutions that have led to the current state of diversity and inclusion within higher education. With the exception of two quantitative surveys of diversity officers (Bendici, 2017; Lambe, 2020), the studies cited thus far do not obtain information directly from DEI practitioners themselves. To gain information about the personal motivations and philosophies that guide present-day DEI practitioners (from both academic and administrative spheres), the forces that shape their practices, the drivers and obstacles behind the realities, and the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the people responsible for determining future outcomes, an in-depth and qualitative methodology would help reveal the effects on individuals and their work as they navigate their environments and provide a better understanding of how institutional communication practices can best position their efforts for success.
Qualitative Data Gathering from Other Groups. Researchers have employed in-depth methodologies to investigate populations adjacent to DEI practitioners. In one example, a study that analyzed in-depth interviews with “Black and minority ethnic academics and postgraduate research students” sought to understand the effects of diversity policies in UK higher education (Ahmet, 2020); the findings suggested that diversity policies not only fell short of their intended goals but brought additional negative effects onto those they intended to help (Ahmet 2020), reinstating “white racial equilibrium” (Ahmet, p. 152) through performative but ineffectual statements and policies that center “whiteness and white comfort” (Ahmet, p. 153) without uprooting existing power and privilege structures (Ahmet, p. 154). Participants mentioned the crafting of job advertisements and other communication efforts that failed to result in any significant changes to perceived or actual inclusion (Ahmet, 2020).

Exploring the other side of power and privilege, Patton and Bondi conducted interviews of white male faculty and administrators who were “perceived to be social justice allies in higher education” (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 489). Identified as allies and recommended for participation in the study by others, participants answered questions about how they perceived themselves as allies, which the authors defined as “people who work for social justice from positions of dominance” (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 489). The authors observed that allies must move “beyond words toward actions that disrupt oppressive structures” and understand their role in oppression (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 489). Using concepts from critical race theory, the authors found that the participants’ tendencies to focus their allyship on low-risk activities, such as helping selected individuals, rather than working to challenge systemic and institutional injustices, merely perpetuated their own roles in the existing dominant power structure (Patton & Bondi, 2015).

Aligning with critical race theory, typical inclusion framings in higher education operate from a “deficit discourse,” in which “students have cultural deficits, and the universities are obliged to work harder to better meet their needs” (Hughes, 2015, p. 309). A deficit perspective, seemingly honorable in its intentions to serve diverse students, reinforces the belief that students with greater cultural and
educational capital are the norm, and those who do not meet those standards must be accommodated through extra effort, a situation that perpetuates existing hierarchies and privileges and causes “the reverse of the intention of the social inclusion impulse” (Hughes, 2015, p. 310). Further, Hughes (2015) points out that this type of inclusion discourse is rarely accompanied by changes to teaching and learning practices to welcome the diverse students. Two articles from South African higher education researcher Wilson-Strydom counter the notion of a deficit framework with the concept of a “capabilities perspective” of social justice pertaining to university access; a 2011 article outlines a framework that considers personal, social, and environmental conversion factors that predict how a student will fare in higher education based on the individual characteristics of that student. Rather than measure students against a single standard for inclusion, a capabilities perspective identifies what different students need for success from an equity-oriented lens. A failure to provide access falls on the institution, not the student (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). A 2014 article builds on the framework by drawing comparisons with the work of early social justice theorists John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser (Wilson-Strydom, 2014), who developed the concepts of the fallacy of meritocracy, the equitable redistribution of material and social goods, the concept of marginalized groups, and the equal right of all groups to full participation (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Wilson-Strydom (2014) emphasizes that higher education institutions do not create participatory parity through enrollment demographics but rather through the well-being of individuals and their quality of life.

When focusing on DEI practitioners, we must consider the impact of social justice movements as a disrupter of both the goals of DEI and how practitioners seek to carry out the work, as this will help us understand the data that might emerge due to the current prevalence of social justice viewpoints in public discourse, as evidenced by the rise and continued activity of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #OccupyWallStreet, #MeToo, and others. As Patton and Bondi noted, “…it is highly possible that control and power in efforts to ‘help’ can become problematic and antithetical to social justice” (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 508); social justice movements and perspectives offer alternate ways to make change that could
be more effective than traditional DEI practices and positioning. While traditional institutional DEI efforts may have grown from early pedagogical developments such as the Multicultural Education movement, social media-born social justice movements come from outside of the academy, intervening with more direct and rapid opposition to systemic injustice. Within the last decade, these digital and real-life movements have grown in influence, affecting all facets of society, including higher education.

**Social Justice Perspectives in Higher Education**

**Comparison of Traditional DEI vs. Social Justice Messaging.** The contrast between traditional DEI practices and social justice viewpoints comes to light in a study by Warikoo and Deckman (2014) that includes in-depth interviews of students at two universities with similar demographics, one whose policies and practices embodied an “integration and celebration approach” and one that espoused a “power analysis and support” approach (p. 960). The first university, under the pseudonym of “Harmony University,” emphasized intercultural understanding with a mission to “enhance the quality of our shared life” (p. 964). The second university, under the pseudonym of “Powers University,” prioritized supporting minority students and their identities by “providing opportunities to develop in-group solidarity to confront racial oppression” (p. 965). Findings showed that these institutional structures can have different influences on students; the minority support approach led to a strong sense of community among students of color and a social justice frame for understanding race, while the integration and celebration approach that focused on commonalities among all students led to less critical engagement about inequality, discrimination, and power but less divisiveness. The takeaways are that campus diversity approaches have the potential to shape students’ perspectives on diversity, and that these differing diversity-related goals and outcomes may not be compatible with each other. Warikoo and Deckman (2014) conclude with recognition of the challenge of developing a model that supports both goals.

**Academic Affairs vs. Student Affairs Approaches to DEI.** Researchers have examined university websites to learn how these contrasting approaches manifest within universities. LePeau,
Hurtado, and Davis published two articles from a larger study (LePeau, et al., 2018b, p. 16) that examined the correlation between intra-organizational partnerships and how institutions carry out the work of both DEI and social justice. The studies also reinforce the finding that institutional websites are “an important medium for creating and delivering messages that communicate institutional values about diversity” (LePeau, et al., 2018a, p. 127).

The first study, published in April 2018, carries the title, “What Institutional Websites Reveal About Diversity-Related Partnerships Between Academic and Student Affairs” (LePeau, et al., 2018a), while the second, published in Fall 2018, carries the title, “Institutional Commitments to Diversity and Social Justice Displayed on Websites: A Content Analysis” (LePeau, et al., 2018b). In both, the authors define “diversity” as “working across and valuing differences” and “social justice” as “action steps taken to transform inequitable organizational systems and structures” (LePeau, et al., 2018a, p. 126; LePeau, et al., 2018b, p. 17).

The first study applies a conceptual framework in which institutions have “coordinated,” “complementary,” or “pervasive” partnerships between academic and student affairs units, depending on the extent and frequency of collaboration across functional workgroups (LePeau, et al., 2018a). The authors note an increased prevalence of social justice approaches at institutions where partnerships exceed the “coordinated” category and achieve the better “complementary” or best “pervasive” partnership characteristics to successfully embed both DEI and social justice practices throughout the institution. Findings showed that the majority of institutions use a combination of coordinated and complementary partnerships, and only a few have pervasive partnerships.

The second study applies a different conceptual framework, the “Cycle of Making Continuous Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion” (LePeau, et al., 2018b, p. 19), in which “commitment” signifies the ways that different institutional stakeholders address inequity (LePeau, et al., 2018b, p. 19). The framework includes eight dimensions defining aspects of partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs practitioners. Within these dimensions, the authors found a “cultural divide” between the
two groups, with academic affairs tending toward traditional inclusion approaches and student affairs favoring social justice approaches, most likely due to their difference in perceived power within the institution and their historical specialization in different parts of the student experience (LePeau, et al., 2018b, p. 18). However, by intentionally promoting collaborative efforts and commitments to both diversity and social justice across the eight dimensions, LePeau, et al. conclude that institutions can advance in both areas (2018b, p. 18).

The pair of studies from LePeau, et al. build on LePeau’s earlier work examining the benefits of student affairs and academic affairs partnerships for enhancing higher education institutions’ abilities to address issues related to diversity by leveraging the different lenses and skill sets of the two types of practitioners (LePeau, 2015). Through interviews of participants from four different institutions with varying degrees of partnerships, the earlier 2015 study is notable in that the author suggests that findings revealed that participants practicing from a social justice orientation (which the author calls “social gadflies” who persistently challenge the status quo) help the two types of practitioners overcome silos and work more successfully together within institutions, providing a “critical dimension to developing AA and SA partnerships” (LePeau, 2015, p. 118). As in the later studies, participants cited institutional diversity statements, mission statements, and the language of commitments to diversity as the ways in which participants measured their institutions’ values relating to inclusiveness (LePeau, 2015).

**Origins of the Differences Between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Approaches.**

LePeau traced the ideological differences between academic affairs and student affairs as coming from a historical separation of the in-class learning traditionally associated with academic affairs contrasted with the extracurricular learning associated with student affairs, resulting in “thinkers” vs. “doers” (LePeau 2015, p. 99). She also noted that academic affairs usually align with a faculty orientation, in which one is rewarded for working isolation, while student affairs practitioners are trained to work collaboratively (LePeau 2015).
Kennedy and Wheeler (2018) further explore this tendency in a longitudinal study that examines two decades of student affairs professional development in which multiculturalism, equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice have all factored into the preparation of emerging student affairs professionals (Kennedy & Wheeler, 2018). This training is now considered “essential” for “graduate students preparing for effective practice in student services” (Kennedy & Wheeler, 2018, p. 490) to build “a philosophy of life-long learning and commitment to social justice” (p. 491).

In a study of how student affairs practitioners employ social justice frameworks to implement assessment and evaluation processes, a section exploring barriers to these activities finds difference in how institutions espouse social justice and how they enact it (Zerquera, Reyes, Pender, & Abbady, 2018).

“…more than half of all participants saw at least moderate levels of public commitments to social justice (e.g., institutional documents, public addresses, within the institutional mission statement itself). … Enactment, however, was a different story … staff training, workplace policies, and academic support services were areas where social justice was noted to be particularly absent…. Notably, the lack of emphasis on social justice in these structural aspects of the institution encourages ignorance in the workplace and impedes the enactment of a social justice agenda on campus. Consequently, the presence of social justice is dependent on the agency and social justice awareness that individual student affairs professionals bring to their work.” (Zerquera, et al., p. 25).

Although student affairs practitioners were the most likely to have a social justice orientation, their work was often siloed within institutions, leading the authors to conclude that “individual efforts are not sufficient to shift an organizational culture” (Zerquera, et al., p. 36) when isolated individuals carry “the bulk of the social justice work of the institution” (Zerquera, et al., p. 37).

**Social Justice in the Classroom.** Recently, universities have begun requiring diversity and/or social justice courses of their undergraduates. As Fernhaber and Hines (2021) write, these requirements generally involve “students developing an ability to engage in questions pertaining to social justice and diversity and preparing for the world we now live in” (Fernhaber & Hines, 2021). They cite the rise of social justice movements as creating a “pressure to make change happen” that has carried over to higher education, which is a “vital setting” to address these topics through both curricular and extracurricular
requirements (Fernhaber & Hines, 2021, p. 261). Their study examines the types of social justice and/or diversity courses required at U.S. universities (Fernhaber & Hines, 2021). The courses may not directly eradicate systemic injustice but signal higher education’s acknowledgement of these societal issues and the importance of educating future leaders about them.

Thus far, the literature has shown differences between academic affairs and student affairs in their approaches to inclusion and social justice in higher education. Yet another influence comes from university faculty, whose work in various disciplines can have direct bearing on the workings of their institutions. For example, Oregon State University’s Difference, Power, and Discrimination Program draws from social justice teachings but also specifically from feminist studies, due to the specialization of the faculty members who helped develop the program. Osei-Kofi (2018) writes that interdisciplinarity is effective for teaching social justice because multiple scholarly perspectives help to fully answer complex questions (Osei-Kofi, 2018), and the work of faculty “in relation to social justice education has the potential to be a powerful tool to realize not only classroom but also institutional changes” (Osei-Kofi, 2018, p. 170). In an earlier analysis, Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi (2010) explored several different ways in which scholarly disciplines can inform social justice practice in what they called “a preliminary map of the landscape” (Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010, p. 268) that includes social justice theories from “feminist studies, sociology, history, disability studies, critical pedagogy, postcolonial studies, globalization, and ethnic studies” (Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010, p. 267). The authors posit that interdisciplinary scholarly work can help higher education institutions understand and embody social justice in a more holistic way than a limited focus on “academic affairs and student affairs” approaches (Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010, p. 275).

Faculty members in the field of education have examined the teaching of social justice in depth, especially in the recent national climate of polarizing elections (Drago-Severson & Blum-Destefano, 2017). Education research has underscored the importance of “authentic communication” and “perspective transformation” to bring about change (Drago-Severson & Blum-Destefano, 2017, p. 458).
as social justice is “the most important imperative of education reform today” (Drago-Severson & Blum-Destefano, 2017, p. 460). However, university faculty members have experienced difficulties navigating politics when attempting to teach what they feel are fundamental tenets of their disciplines—such as the historical marginalization of identities and the dynamics of power and privilege—which some students and administrators regard as political opinions (Elliot & Blair, 2020).

From the field of psychology, Nunes (2021) differentiates DEI approaches as coming from either a moral or instrumental perspective; framing DEI as a moral imperative aligns with social justice frameworks examined earlier in this review, whereas an instrumental framing conveys benefits to privileged groups or “positive effects on learning outcomes for everyone,” more so than for the underrepresented groups (Nunes, 2021, para 3), whether they are based on race, ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, gender, disability, or sexual orientation (Nunes, 2021, para 29). Such a distinction returns to the fundamental question of whether disruption of the status quo is necessary for progress.

**Criticism of Social Justice Approaches.** While social justice proponents may be willing to sacrifice harmony and brand capital in exchange for the correction of inequities, others resist. Yale law professor Anthony Kronman’s 2019 book, *The Assault on American Excellence* criticizes what he calls “the dogmatic embrace of identity politics” (Kronman, 2019, p. C.1), claiming it has “damaged not just the pursuit of truth but the independence of mind necessary for democracy to flourish” (Kronman, p. C.1). Targeting social justice at universities, he writes, “The commitment was honorable, but the conversion has been ruinous,” leading to a “culture of grievance and group loyalty.” (Kronman, p. C.1). We also hear an attempt to restore the status quo when he states, “Rather than bringing faculty and students together on the common ground of reason, it has pushed them farther apart into separate silos of guilt and complaint” (Kronman, p. C.1). He ignores, however, the notion that those in power often oppose changes that threaten that power. Kronman’s critiques are not new, and academia has devoted space to countering claims that social justice education is divisive. Countering with the observation that social justice is not just about “the recognition and celebration of difference” and “remedying prejudice and hate”
(Applebaum, 2009, p. 378), but rather understanding and detecting the “covert” and complex systems that contribute to educational inequality, systemic injustice, and “our complicity in it” (Applebaum, 2009, p. 378). Applebaum holds that charges of liberal bias function to suppress challenges to power, the very thing that educating and communicating about social justice aims to unmask. She questions “intellectual diversity” arguments that support existing power structures and prevent students from having access to the classrooms in which intellectual diversity can flourish (Applebaum, 2009). In this light, social justice isn’t an opinion to be expressed but a fundamental right of everyone.

**Pedagogical Perspectives on Social Justice Advocacy.** After this examination of real-world examples in which we have seen varying approaches to change-making within university settings, it is important to see where current scholarship focuses for future applications in these same contexts.

Earlier in this century, the multicultural education (MCE) framework, which emerged in many parts of the world, has been defined in the U.S. as “content integration, prejudice reduction, and equity pedagogy as key dimensions of educational practice aimed at redressing the historical marginalization of non-dominant ethnic groups” (Banks, 2004, p. xiii). A precursor of current-day social justice theories, MCE emerged from the Civil Rights Movement as a response to the perceived needs of marginalized populations. However, educators began to reject the MCE framework due to several shortcomings in the model, including its lack of integration into educational efforts, an overemphasis on demographic difference, and a failure to interrogate patterns of privilege and oppression or recognize the connections between broader issues of power, privilege, and justice as they affect education (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010).

More recently, Frey and Palmer (2014) developed communication activism pedagogy (CAP), a framework that “teaches students studying communication how to use their communication knowledge and capabilities to promote social justice.” Although their work mainly discusses how communication educators can use the principles in an educational context, the principles themselves provide a model for communication practice; through this framework, communicators learn how to move beyond awareness
of injustice and toward intervention and action. Practitioners “use communication theories, methods, and practices to intervene in unjust situations and work toward social change” (Batac, 2016, p. 361). The work builds on prior books from 2007 and 2012 that focused on activism in communication. Together, the three volumes explore 31 examples of activism by communication researchers who sought to promote social change through the use of dialogue and discussion, communication consulting; media management; and artistic performance in efforts such as publishing a newspaper by women prisoners, advocating for LGBT representation in the media, working to reduce the digital divide in low income communities, protesting war in Iraq, and seeking to eradicate the death penalty (Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, & 2012). Batac (2016) notes that the authors don’t argue that all scholars should become CAP practitioners, but that there should be space and a community for such teaching and practice. CAP goes beyond consciousness-raising to developing practical engagement for making unjust systems more just (Del Gandio, 2015) and “empowers communication scholars, both researchers and teachers—and, more broadly, teachers of any topic—to view communicative practices in their classes through the lens of social justice activism” (Batac 2016, p. 363). In citing Frey and Palmer’s work, Badger (2015) notes their observation that “activism, fundamentally, is an accomplishment of (constituted in), and is accomplished through, communication” (Frey & Palmer, 2014, p. 24).

With teachings such as these, will students and communicators be satisfied with the non-performative commitments to diversity and inclusion examined earlier in this review? And with the knowledge that communication activism provides a framework in which communicators can and should try to effect change, should they take more assertive positions when creating messaging for their institutions? In attempting to answer these questions, it is important to note that Frey and Carragee showcased the work of academic researchers who chose to pursue projects in which they had a vested personal interest, and that they had more freedom to do so than professional communicators working on behalf of an organization. They acknowledge that “the communication scholars in these volumes chose to stand against domination, oppression, and other social injustices… these scholars chose to conduct
research that potentially could make an important difference for marginalized and underresourced individuals, groups, organizations, and communities attempting to promote social change and social justice” (Frey & Carragee, 2007a, p. 30). They then concede that “attempting to enact these and other principles of communication activism scholarship presents significant challenges” (Frey & Carragee, 2007a, p. 36), among which are the need to enlist wide involvement and support and deal with opposition, tensions, slow progress, and imperfect or even nonexistent outcomes (Frey & Carragee, 2007a).

**A Communication Model for Managing Conflict.** Whereas an activist stance may be easier to envision than to execute within an institution of higher education, a model that could provide a practical and actionable conceptual framework for managing conflict is the co-orientation model (Bronn & Bronn, 2003, as cited from McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). Originally developed to provide communicators with a method to improve stakeholder relationships within organizations, Bronn and Bronn suggest that the model can be applied to many types of complex and contentious issues (2003).

The model outlines a process in which the first step, termed *reflection*, is to identify, analyze, and understand the complexities behind each stakeholder perspective; this “problem understanding” is the basis for creating “mental models,” which are essentially “a personal theory of how things work” (Bronn & Bronn, p. 293). Models are individual but can be shared and communicated within groups. Acknowledging the limitations of human comprehension, the authors posit that the risk of inaccurate or incomplete understanding can be mitigated through the use of a “ladder of inference,” a step-by-step, repeating loop of reflexively checking one’s inferences, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs in a systematic way before taking action (Bronn & Bronn, p. 294).

Next, “orienting” the models by identifying commonalities among them enables the communicator to find points of agreement that allow stakeholders to “recognize the validity of the other party’s concern” (Bronn & Bronn, p. 293). A key concept of the framework is that “agreement is not necessarily to be expected, but an appreciation of the multiple interpretations of a complex situation is imperative to achieve understanding” (Bronn & Bronn, p. 292). Tactics for conveying stakeholder
perspectives include *advocacy* and *inquiry*. Whereas communication activism as described earlier concentrates its efforts mostly on advocacy, co-orientation emphasizes the importance of balancing advocacy with inquiry to engage stakeholders in dialogue. In this model, the communicator holds a role beyond simply conveying institutional positions, instead acting as more of a manager of relationships, a negotiator, and a strategic facilitator of progress (Bronn & Bronn, p. 300). Subsequent studies have examined applications of the co-orientation model in journalism, where co-orientation may manifest as a conscientious effort to maintain objectivity in service to the greater good (Hanitzsch, 2004), and in public relations, where co-orientation may manifest as an upholding of social responsibility regardless of one’s clients (Attansey Okigbo, & Schmidt, 2007). The simultaneous holding of multiple interpretations within the co-orientation model echoes the idea that emerged from Lambe’s study participants about the need to be “multi-partial” (not impartial) to do DEI work successfully (Lambe, 2020, p. 3).

**Summary**

The preceding examination of literature has shown how universities position themselves using traditional DEI approaches and social justice approaches. Findings and opinions regarding how well DEI offices both communicate and fulfill their missions vary, and it is challenging to show more than qualified or partial success across institutions of higher education because inequities persist. At the same time, social justice proponents and educators call for new approaches that center the experiences of marginalized groups to correct these inequities, approaches that in some cases diametrically oppose traditional DEI approaches. In contexts such as higher education, where communicators may not have the ability to become full-fledged social justice activists, a more successful approach could employ the co-orientation model as a means of facilitating and negotiating change through reflection, inquiry, and advocacy.

Traditional DEI practices have helped institutions of higher education progress in some ways but not in others. Social justice movements have also emerged over the last half-century. While sometimes
tumultuous and irreconcilable with civil discourse, these movements provide alternate ways of approaching DEI work. It is necessary to see how DEI practitioners view these approaches to find out whether their insights might lead to more effective ways for communicators to position DEI in higher education. To better understand the motivations and responsibilities of current DEI practitioners, the following study focused on a sample of professionals serving in a range of DEI-focused roles within universities, all from institutions that have a population and resources large enough to serve those needs. The study sought to gain an analysis of what these practitioners do, and why and how they do it.

The literature only yields a small number of studies attempting to discern the use of codified practices relating to diversity and inclusion, and especially relating to social justice, as frameworks for advancing efforts in DEI in higher education. There is correspondingly also a lack of evidence of communication strategy on behalf of these efforts, as observed in the messaging that serves to document and position these efforts at the institutions where they take place, as studied using content analysis of websites and other methods. To learn more about the DEI practices in higher education, the author conducted a qualitative study to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What guides the work of DEI practitioners in higher education?

**RQ2:** How do DEI professionals do their work, and how is it communicated?

**RQ3:** To what extent do practitioners perceive conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices?

**RQ4:** How can institutional DEI offices best position themselves to draw from both traditional DEI practices and social justice practices to achieve their goals more effectively?

This understanding helped to illuminate current thought behind how DEI practitioners achieve (or do not achieve) success based on their approaches to the work, which in turn might aid those who communicate on behalf of these practitioners and their institutions by enabling them to create institutional messaging not only in the most appropriate ways, but also in ways that work best to advance their
institutional missions of achieving equity and inclusion in education so that graduates can in turn create and be part of a better and more equitable society.

METHOD

Design

The study used in-depth interviews as a flexible and interpretive means of data collection. Due to the complexity and variety of DEI work, this method was advantageous because it did not limit participant responses to a predetermined set of options but rather opened the data collection to responses that could reveal interdependencies between participant roles and activities and define the relationships and other interconnected drivers of those activities. The in-depth interview method satisfied the need for a sensitive investigation of the potentially complex philosophies, opinions, and ideas that involve initiatives to promote and advance equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education.

The interviews included 23 questions (included in the Appendix) organized into six categories:

1. understanding the interviewees
2. DEI practices
3. social justice practices
4. wider implications of social justice
5. perceived conflicts and synergies
6. communication methods

Throughout the interview process, the interviewer asked follow-up questions when needed to help elicit additional information from participants and to add clarity.
Participants

The author currently serves as communications director for the DEI office at North Carolina State University, a large, land-grant research university that employs DEI staff in positions spanning the roles of DEI officer, equal opportunity and equity compliance officer, bias impact mitigation coordinator, DEI engagement and education coordinator, cultural/identity center director/staff member, and DEI communicator. Some of these positions fall under the DEI umbrella within the organizational hierarchy and others fall under the student affairs umbrella; the distribution of roles varies by institution.

Study participants were recruited from a total of six public and private North Carolina universities spanning the state. A pair of interviewees represented each institution, one from a DEI office and the other in a DEI-affiliated student affairs position, to provide a range of perspectives.

The author selected a non-random sample of twelve participants that included six participants obtained through the author’s professional network and six from referrals gained from those initial contacts. Although the author has a professional relationship with the two interviewees from her own institution and sporadic professional interactions with four others, these relationships are limited to work activities and did not interfere with objective data collection.

The study participant group had the following characteristics:

- Six study participants identified as being DEI professionals outside of student affairs and the other six identified as being DEI-affiliated professionals working within student affairs.
- Six study participants served in a role with the title of DEI director/officer and the other six participants served in a role with a title of cultural/identity center director or student affairs center director.
- Pairs of study participants came from Duke University, North Carolina State University; and the University of North Carolina institutions at Asheville, Chapel Hill, Pembroke, and Wilmington.
• Seven study participants identified as female and five identified as male.

• Eight study participants identified as Black or Black and multiracial, two participants identified as Native American/American Indian or Native American and multiracial, two participants identified as Latinx, and two participants identified as being non-Hispanic white or non-Hispanic white and multiracial.

• Four study participants were in the 21-35 age range, four participants were in the 36-45 age range, and four participants were in the 46-65 age range.

Although the author initially recruited six DEI professionals and six DEI-affiliated student affairs professionals, during the interview process, four of the interviewees indicated that they classified themselves as falling within the opposite category to the one initially presumed by the author; two subjects with the title of DEI director identified themselves as being student affairs professionals, and two subjects with the title of cultural/identity center director identified themselves as being DEI professionals apart from student affairs. While this recategorization did not change the overall composition of participants in this study, it did reveal variations and possible ambiguities within organizational reporting structures and/or institutional DEI functions that could merit future study to determine their possible effects on work activities, positioning, and outcomes.

**Procedures**

Before beginning, the author obtained permission from the interviewees to conduct and record the interviews via the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Interviews ran from just under sixty minutes to just over ninety minutes, depending on the amount of information the interviewee chose to share. The recordings were transcribed so that selected quotes could be reported, as recommended by Dick (2005). Gift cards were provided as incentives for participation.

A minimum of demographic data was collected at the culmination of each interview to allow description in the study. To maintain confidentiality, the author offered participants the choice of using a
pseudonym or identification number as a display name in the transcripts. Identifying information does not appear in findings and notes; instead, the following unique identifiers are used:

- Participant 1A and 1B were from a small university.
- Participant 2A and 2B were from a second small university.
- Participant 3A and 3B were from a mid-sized university.
- Participant 4A and 4B were from a second mid-sized university.
- Participant 5A and 5B were from a large university.
- Participant 6A and 6B were from a second large university.

In this study, a small university is defined as having fewer than 10,000 students, a mid-sized university is defined as having between 10,000-25,000 students, and a large university is defined as having more than 25,000 students. Participants with an identifier of ‘A’ worked in a DEI office, and participants with an identifier of ‘B’ worked in a DEI-affiliated role within student affairs.

After completion of the interviews, the author listened to each interview in its entirety to review the data, correct and de-identify the autogenerated transcripts, and make note of recurring themes and response patterns. Preliminary data evaluation and coding led the author to make minor changes to the order of questions and to add alternate phrasings and follow-ups for questions to help encourage interviewees to share additional information.

Upon completion of the interviews, the author used the open coding method to apply codes to each distinct idea mentioned in response to each question throughout the transcripts, collecting the codes into separate files for each question and theme, and then using axial and selective coding, characteristic of grounded theory demonstrated by Corbin and Strauss (1990), to identify emerging themes and to identify and collate the prominent findings, which were reviewed in the context of both the research questions and the interview questions, as discussed in the following section.
Reflexivity/Positionality

The question that originally led to this research centered on what guides the work of DEI practitioners in higher education, the impetus being the author’s own university, where leadership had merged into one division the DEI functions with identity/cultural centers that had originally resided within student affairs. A stark difference in approaches and ideologies periodically led to disagreement and discord; those in DEI roles seemed to favor more conservative, measured practices, while those in the centers favored bolder, social justice-oriented approaches. With one communications team serving both of these differing positions, it was difficult to determine how to create messaging that represented a unified voice for the entire division while also simultaneously appealing to target audiences and adhering to the institutional brand. Related questions pertained to whether DEI practitioners at other institutions perceive these same inherent conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices, and whether (and how) DEI offices can strategically position themselves to draw from both types of practices, leveraging what might be most successful from both for achieving their missions. Through this study, the author hoped to find communication practices to best serve all audiences while maintaining an objective stance as an observer and investigator of DEI practitioners’ thoughts and motivations.

In addition, the author’s personal characteristics as a biracial individual contributed to her curiosity about how to hold and uplift multiple perspectives. Accustomed to navigating different ways of being, she seeks to model an openness to diversity in both personal and professional practices. As a descendant of some of the earliest Chinese Americans on her father’s side and some of the earliest Jewish Americans on her mother’s side, she has experienced the pressure to assimilate into majority cultures throughout her life, a pressure that can be compared to the impulse documented by Patton, et al. (2010) in their pseudonymous “Harmony University.” To recognize that this impulse might hinder the progress of social justice is a reckoning worth investigating. And as a communicator, it is perhaps even more important to understand how it can ultimately inform or hinder the ability to create change.
FINDINGS

Understanding the Interviewees

As a means of easing interviewees into speaking about their beliefs and practices and orienting the discussion around the subjects’ professional activities, the interviews began with questions about each person’s professional role and early career motivations. The three initial questions were:

- What is your professional role and what does it encompass?
- What led you to this work?
- What would you say guides your work today in the field of DEI in higher education?

Early Motivations. Ten of the twelve subjects cited early experiences as undergraduate students that either influenced or impacted their personal identity development, and eleven of the subjects spoke of their identity as part of a marginalized or underrepresented group as being a major factor in their desire to enter the field of DEI. Several subjects spoke specifically about being drawn to multicultural spaces during their college years out of the necessity of finding a place to belong and feel safe and then later discovering the career possibilities of helping to provide that same resource for others. One identity/cultural center director recalled,

“… a lot of folks who work in higher ed, but specifically who work in student affairs, sort of stumbled into it. … As a college student, as a first-gen student, when I was an undergrad, a newly-identified queer student, as a Black student, there were so many identities that I didn't understand at the time, how they impacted my experience as a student, until I got well into my college career … and so, when I decided to go to graduate school, I was like, educational leadership, student affairs, yes, this is it, this is how I do this, because that was my experience, that the folks who, at the time, I didn't know they worked in student affairs, but the folks who were supporting me, I wanted to be like them, and a lot of that had to do with how they supported me in the context of the identities that I had that were marginalized.” (Participant 1B)

Another identity/cultural center director spoke of her initial reluctance as an undergrad to visit an identity center within her out-of-state, predominantly white institution until she experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation. At first resistant to being “put in a box,” she eventually visited the center and found it to be
a source of “welcoming and community.” At the same time, for financial reasons, this subject found that student employment in student affairs spaces was a useful avenue for attending campus events she couldn’t otherwise afford.

“… as a broke college student, I was always trying to find ways to be more creative with how I can make money or get access to stuff for free if I couldn't afford something. I actually worked as a student coordinator in the Greek Life office. I wanted to go to alumni weekend, but I couldn't afford a ticket. I became a student ambassador in the alumni office so that I could also attend events. Housing was really pricey, so I became an RA, and I got free access, so I unintentionally gave myself many internships in the field of student affairs in higher ed…” (Participant 6B)

This subject’s combined experiences led her to pursue a master’s degree and career in higher education focusing on student development.

Supporting the idea of the college experience as a time of identity development, one DEI director described growing up in the Lumbee Native American community and then traveling to a different part of the state for college. It was only when he arrived there that he realized the uniqueness of his identity and began to learn more about his own culture, to value this knowledge, and to share it with others.

“… taking me out of that comfort zone forced me to grow and learn more about who I was as an American Indian, because folks were asking me questions about who are the Lumbee, can you tell me about this, tell me about that, and I didn't know. I knew I was Indian, I knew our culture, but I didn't know it in a way where I could articulate it to folks outside of the community, so that began this journey of self-awareness for me, then I quickly realized that I have always been an advocate for marginalized and minoritized communities. And so when I began this journey about me, it was also a journey about learning about others and how I could help raise awareness of those communities…” (Participant 2A)

Despite the variations among these stories, a common thread of students with non-majority identities seeking support and community and finding it in DEI and student affairs spaces highlights their importance for marginalized groups, both to improve inclusion within the institution and to provide dedicated welcoming spaces for students with those identities. The stories also reflect a common deep-seated motivation of DEI professionals to provide the same support for students that they themselves received and found critical to their own success.
Current Motivations. Examining how the subjects’ careers evolved from their early motivations to what drives their work today, responses indicated a continuation of those same forces, with some evidence of a more pragmatic outlook about the workings of higher education and some frustration about the slow pace of change. With an evenly distributed mix of early- to mid-career professionals, the subjects displayed varying amounts of satisfaction with their own achievements and the progress of higher education and society in general.

One identity/cultural center director, who spoke of being initially motivated by current events and the desire to help women in crisis, noted that even though the “climate has stayed the same,” her outlook has expanded as she has matured, and she has gained “a better sense of awareness of “all the -isms, of racism, sexism, power, and privilege.” She spoke about working for the next generation, including her own children.

“…as frustrating as it is to sometimes see things happen in the news and it's like, oh my gosh, it’s one step forward, two steps back, you know, that is what kind of drives me—the younger generation… when I see that they are getting it, I’m like, okay, we're moving in the right direction, we're not seeing it now, but something is sticking. So… that is what is driving me.” (Participant 3B)

A somewhat less optimistic DEI director stated,

“Unfortunately, while I have seen some things change over the last decade… from my professional experience in higher ed, when we talk about equity and intentional inclusion, there are not a lot of things that have changed…” (Participant 5B)

However, a few DEI practitioners spoke of their affinity for working within the constraints of the institution to effect change. One DEI director highlighted higher education’s ability to provide “an avenue out of poverty or an avenue to live a better life,” adding,

“But I also think maybe my motivation now has shifted a little more to, you know, figuring out how to get my institution to operate more efficiently—in addition to this, more what I would consider kind of social justice related stuff around kind of like upward mobility— a lot of it is just… figuring out how we can operate more efficiently so that we can serve our academic mission a little bit better.” (Participant 1A)
Conversely, DEI officers who focus on institutional compliance with policies and laws may operate closer to a baseline of expectations rather than striving for utopian ideals, as exemplified by a DEI officer who stated,

“I have this general philosophy that everybody deserves access to a good education about what they want to learn about, without having to be discriminated or harassed through that process or, from a Title IX standpoint, having to deal with sexual harassment or worse, while they’re in college. So for me now, this stuff matters—to ensure that employees and students know they have somewhere to go when there's issues; for those that are causing issues to know that this is not tolerated, and we want to try and stop it.” (Participant 5A)

Despite individual variations, subjects illustrated strong initial driving motivations of making the college experience better for marginalized students, motivations that continue to the present day but are somewhat tempered by the realities of working to overcome longstanding challenges in institutional settings. Two subjects, one serving as a CDO and the other an identity/cultural center leader who earned a doctorate more recently, expressed a desire to work (or continue working) at a high level within their institution because of the enhanced power to create change. The CDO stated, “I want people to feel as if there's an ally, there is someone in the senior-level leadership that is attuned to their issues and always bringing them to the forefront.” The recent Ph.D. echoed,

“…getting that terminal degree, hopefully, I look forward to affording more opportunities to maybe play more of a role with policy, and that's kind of where I want to go to be able to effect more change, and that's something that kind of fits into my level. Certainly, when I was an entry-level new professional, wanting to be in those rooms, at those tables where those decisions are being made, that is what's driving me now.” (Participant 3A)

On the whole, subjects had an intertwining of personal and professional purpose and motivation in which their accomplishments in the field and on the job related closely to their personal experiences and goals.

**DEI Practices**

The second set of interview questions centered on DEI practices. As a field, DEI is generally well understood within higher education; all of the universities included in this study have a range of
designated DEI professionals in their employ. As evidenced in the literature, DEI has transformed from a novel idea to a mainstay in higher education over the last five decades, and in most places, is now a necessity for recruiting, rankings, grant funding, and other institutional imperatives. To understand how subjects in this study thought about their field, this section included the following questions:

- How do you define diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- If you think back over your career, what are some types of DEI practices that you have helped to implement or carry out in the field of higher education?
- Do you feel these practices have been successful?

**DEI Definitions.** Along with general agreement about the meaning of the terms *diversity, equity,* and *inclusion,* asking subjects how they defined “DEI practices” generated seven distinct codes. If subjects seemed to hesitate, the interviewer offered to read the following definition, excerpted from the non-partisan, non-profit organization *Code for America,* as a starting point:

“efforts to create and maintain an environment in which any individual or groups is and feels welcomed, respected, supported, valued, and able to fully participate; a welcoming culture that embraces differences, demonstrates respect in words and actions for all people, and fosters a diversity of thought, ideas, perspectives, and values” (*Code for America,* 2021).

Interview subjects added the following distinct ideas to the definitions of “DEI practices” (listed in chronological order of collection during interviews with any subsequent mentions added to the total number of mentions indicated in parentheses):

- identification of impacts that require the creation of an equitable experience (4)
- moving beyond tolerance to respecting, welcoming, valuing, and appreciating difference (2)
- being intentional and proactive, not reactive
- representation without tokenization or quotas
- normalizing identities and frameworks that are not white, straight, cisgender, or Christian (2)
- creating a space where all feel empowered to contribute and everyone’s needs are met (3)
• ensuring that people feel safe and that they belong in the spaces that they occupy (3)

Perhaps due to the general nature of the Code for America definition provided to most of the subjects during the course of the interviews, the discussion resulting from this question remained conceptual, without much reflection on the specific actions and behaviors that would characterize such practices.

The author noted that the particular language chosen to express these definitions could reveal deeper thought about DEI practices that might not come to light in a short interview. For example, one subject, whose response was coded together with “moving beyond tolerance to respecting, welcoming, valuing, and appreciating difference” spoke about “taking a cultural wealth perspective,” a term possibly drawn from scholar Tara Yosso’s work in critical race theory. Another subject, whose response was coded with “creating a space where all feel empowered to contribute and everyone’s needs are met” mentioned the need for “a brave space for individuals to explore their identities,” perhaps using a term from scholars Brian Arao and Kristi Clemons that differentiates brave spaces from safe spaces by defining brave spaces as those that specifically protect vulnerable groups from hostile environments. While outside the scope of this paper, terms such as these reflect the rapid evolution of DEI thought and could signify more nuance in the responses than examined here.

Examples of DEI Practices. The second question attempted to explore some of the activities that could embody the definitions mentioned by the subjects. The interviewer asked subjects to think about DEI practices they had helped to implement or carry out over the course of their career. If needed, the interviewer clarified that they could discuss any activity or initiative that came to mind, perhaps something that stood out as a good example of a DEI practice or something they were currently striving to implement, with the idea that subjects would highlight best practices, or at least practices they felt worthy of mention.

Each of the twelve subjects listed between one and eight activities that they categorized as DEI practices, with the majority mentioning three or four. Most of the practices represented recurring
programs and services within their institutions that fell within the subjects’ job responsibilities, with a few mentioning larger, one-time initiatives involving other institutions, such as starting a lab school or working to launch a postdoctoral fellowship exchange with a neighboring HBCU (historically Black college/university). Practices included conducting training programs, creating transparency around institutional processes, providing equitable accommodations for students impacted by gender violence, bringing diverse speakers to campus, creating mentoring/support or coaching/tutoring programs, pushing for inclusive housing policies for LGBTQIA+ students, organizing cultural awareness programs, procuring and coordinating a diversity innovation fund, mediating bias incidents, holding roundtable events with diverse communities, building rapport with students, hiring diverse student workers, creating welcoming physical spaces, overseeing student organizations, celebrating marginalized identities in a variety of ways, hosting a national conference, and serving as an educator and resource in various capacities.

One DEI director described how he worked to remodel his center as a physical representation of inclusion, replacing all the furnishings with more inviting ones and adding large canvas prints of diverse students engaged on campus. As a newer director, he also described creating “community resource cards, which serve as an inventory of all the academic programs, services, and student organizations that are available to all of the diverse communities on campus.” In doing so, he discovered inequities among the amounts of resources currently available to different groups and is now working to rectify that problem.

The frequent mention of training programs, speakers, and other interpersonal activities conducted one-on-one or in person speaks to the importance of relationship building among marginalized communities. Building trust through personal connection extends the idea of welcoming spaces to those who occupy those spaces. Even during the pandemic, personal connection remained an important part of DEI work, as evidenced by this recurring theme cited as a key DEI practice by ten of the twelve subjects.

Several practices mentioned, however, had more of an institutional scope than an individual, interpersonal one. One subject spoke of publishing financial information more transparently to help
ensure equity in budgetary funding, another spoke of implementing qualitative assessment practices and codifying inclusive language, and another talked about working to reframe the institution’s parameters for student success. Others discussed expanding the Title IX response process and working to break down institutional DEI silos.

Taken as a whole, the subjects’ activities corresponded to the definition taken from *Code for America* by working to create a welcoming environment and culture within their institutions that enhances the success of students, staff, and faculty in varying ways.

**Success of DEI Practices.** The last question of the section addressed whether subjects felt the practices they discussed could be considered successful. Perhaps surprisingly after generating such a lengthy list of DEI practices, only two subjects responded with an unqualified affirmative response; the others indicated that some initiatives met with success, but the majority conveyed uncertainty or noted mixed results. Uncertain or negative conditions included the difficulty of measuring or assessing results, internal and external obstacles or opposition, and the long-term nature or delayed progress of some of the activities. One DEI director wondered, “…have I seen systemic, long-lasting change? I don’t know.”

More certain success came from activities benefiting individuals, such as support groups, trainings, tutoring programs, in-person events, consultations, and other direct-impact activities where feedback is direct and easy to measure. One DEI officer stated,

“The biggest thing for me is when I get to go out there and train people…whether it's discrimination, harassment, or Title IX, or unconscious bias, or microaggressions, or other DEI concepts, when I get see people's light bulb come on in the training, where they actually learn something… I like to think that sometimes I’ve changed people's minds and their behaviors in a positive way to affect inclusion across the campuses that I work at. And maybe even in their own lives.” (Participant 5A)

Some of the most memorable and gratifying successes pertaining to DEI practices are those in which the subjects made a clear impact on individuals in the course of their work. Less clear is the long-term impact aside from those individual success stories. For some of the larger, long-term initiatives mentioned,
success was neither as immediate nor apparent. Programs such as the postdoctoral exchange program, lab school, tutoring program, diversity innovation fund, and inclusive housing initiative all depend on high-level support, sustained effort, funding, resources, or constituent demand to continue. One identity/cultural center director concluded, “I hope that I planted a seed… but I never really know.”

Social Justice Practices

The third set of interview questions pertained to social justice practices. Whereas DEI is a fairly well-known part of the higher education organizational structure, social justice is not necessarily part of any DEI practitioner’s job description. But as evidenced in the literature, social justice has become a presence in DEI discourse and also in popular culture, especially in social media, which has become a prevalent communication medium for universities. Even though DEI may have entered higher education first, social justice has arguably evolved alongside it, both together and separately. To understand how subjects in this study thought about social justice, the interviewer asked the following questions:

- How do you define social justice?
- How would you differentiate social justice practices from DEI practices?
- If you think back over your career, what are some types of social justice practices that you have helped to implement or carry out in the field of higher education?
- Do you feel these practices have been successful?
- What are some drawbacks to social justice practices, either in higher education institutions or in society?

Social Justice Definitions. Participants provided their definitions of the term “social justice practices,” generating 15 distinct codes, more than double than for DEI practices. As with the previous definition, if subjects hesitated, the interviewer offered a prepared definition to help spur discussion, in
this case selected from *Teachings for Social Justice*, a book that many of the subjects recognized from prior study or teaching:

“acting with a sense of one’s own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, one’s society, and the broader world in which we live” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

Of those who received the definition, two subjects agreed and had nothing more to add; all others agreed but also added their own thoughts or definitions. The following represent the distinct ideas mentioned as definitions of “social justice practices” by all interviewees (listed in chronological order of collection during interviews with any subsequent mentions added to the total number of mentions indicated in parentheses):

- knowing how much you can advocate for without fear of repercussion
- a personal belief in how things should be and how things should be done
- where everyone is appreciated and authentically and intentionally included (6)
- involving the concept of being an accomplice
- involving coalition building, movements, grassroots engagement, or collective change (4)
- personal agency, responsibility
- where historical connection impacts future implications of what’s possible
- having respectful conversations to try to enact change
- when you see wrong happening, to be willing to say and do something about it (3)
- living in the intersection between one’s sense of wholeness and the world’s needs and maintaining that balance in a socially just way
- looking at broader systems of oppression but also narrowing into particular identities
- creating a world that is equitable, fair, just, and good (2)
- understanding that agency is connected to larger systems of power (4)
- social justice is about restorative justice, fixing what we’ve broken
• a process, a goal; it’s never done, ever evolving, ever changing, the goalpost is always moving to be more inclusive, have better practices

As with the earlier discussion about DEI practices, the discussion around social justice practices was highly conceptual but also more relational and less institutional. One of the main purposes of asking subjects to define both DEI practices and social justice practices was to learn how practitioners differentiate the two. Taken as a whole, the two sets of definitions had a great deal of overlap. For example, DEI practices “create a space where all feel empowered to contribute and everyone’s needs are met,” while social justice practices create a place “where everyone is appreciated and authentically and intentionally included.” The difference between these two definitions is arguably subtle.

A few key differences emerged from the responses. Subjects seemed to feel that social justice practices originate or have strong ties to the community and the larger society outside of their institutions; they have a strong component of individual or group action; and they possibly have a historical connection tied to past harms or systemic injustices. Subjects also conveyed the idea of continuously striving for an ideal state rather than settling for a pragmatic process of incremental change, and taking stronger, bolder actions to confront and disrupt systems of power than DEI practices might allow. Subjects spoke more directly and personally about social justice as a holistic concept of restoration rather than the more procedural or institutional approach to improvement that defines DEI practices.

One identity/cultural center director stated, “social justice is not just about including marginalized individuals at the table, but about who owns the table, the chairs, the room.” Other subjects spoke of “dismantling systems,” “interrogating power” and being an activist. A DEI director who had spoken about reporting and budgets in connection to her DEI work, when asked about social justice, used more personal, emotional language, stating, “it’s something I feel passionate about.”

**Differentiating Social Justice from DEI Practices.** When asked how they viewed the differences between the two approaches, subjects confirmed initial perceptions observed through the
collection of definitions. Through comparison, the author sought to observe the specific dichotomies that subjects used to highlight the differences between their conceptions of the two perspectives.

One DEI director felt that DEI was from a prior time, whereas social justice is “more progressive, now that institutions have moved past [diverse] recruitment to addressing systemic challenges.” She went on to add, “DEI was about supporting students, helping them navigate institutions, recruitment, retention, and now the conversation has shifted to educating others about systems of oppression.” Another DEI director echoed the sentiment with the assertion that “social justice helps move DEI forward, giving it context and history, responsibility, accountability, agency, and collective thinking.” These responses reflect the perception that social justice is a relatively newer concept in higher education.

Another director contrasted the types and degree of activity involved: “with DEI, you have an opportunity to educate, to train, to develop policy; with social justice, that is where your activism comes in and where you can mobilize.” Another DEI director held that “DEI is more internal, focused on the health of the organization, whereas social justice is thinking about how the organization is related to the outside world and individuals’ relationship with both the institution and the community.”

One identity/cultural center director spoke of a combined approach, saying the two “can be blended, and both of them can bring the community together.” But another identity/cultural center director noted that different language might be needed to “reach people on the DEI side vs. the social justice side; they do not always cross over, and things must be communicated differently.” This director went on to state, “DEI has been commodified as an intellectual, cold, isolated, corporate understanding of how to do the right thing in the business place, whereas social justice is a concept that speaks to the communal and collective nature of the work.” A DEI officer provided the differing opinion that “DEI is about education, whereas social justice seems punitive, holding some accountable instead of all.”

In total, the subjects provided numerous pairs of impressions of the two perspectives, including these additional contrasts, each conveyed by one subject:
• DEI is broad; social justice is topical (Participant 6A).
• DEI is structural; social justice is political (Participant 6A).
• DEI can be done quickly; social justice takes longer (Participant 2A).
• DEI creates equity and inclusion; social justice removes barriers (Participant 2A).
• DEI is about education; social justice is about accountability (Participant 5A).
• DEI is about learning or discussing; social justice is about doing (Participant 3A).
• DEI is about making space; social justice is about taking space (Participant 6B).
• DEI is about celebrating; social justice is about being critical (Participant 6B).

Examples of Social Justice Practices. Similar to the question about DEI practices, the interviewer asked subjects to discuss some practices that they had been involved with during their career that they would classify as social justice practices. Each of the twelve subjects mentioned one to four practices, with the majority discussing two to three.

Activities that subjects labeled specifically as social justice practices included organizing workshops, retreats, and service activities focusing on social justice, activism, and leadership development, some in collaboration with faculty members; conducting restorative justice processes; sponsoring student groups or collectives centered around social justice within an identity/cultural center; positioning students as leaders and activists; coordinating student activities in the community to teach about social justice connections and resources in “the outside world;” holding a recurring open forum on campus for students to discuss social justice issues; advocating for policy and law changes for the LGBTQIA+ community; setting up mental health resources for men from marginalized groups; and supporting students in the wake of the DACA repeal despite the fear of legal threats.

One subject spoke about a march organized by student government on his campus after the killing of George Floyd, which served as both as social justice event and learning experience.

“They came to us and wanted to get our advice on how to do it, you know, logistically, emotionally… expressing how they felt, that they wanted to do something. So we worked
together to try to help them comb through a plan. They wanted to march… so we looked at some other examples of peaceful and positive protests… to give them some examples of how to do things the right way, contact the city—you don't just go out in the streets and take over, there's a method to doing things, and as a university, we try to teach them the process, all the way up through the march, and then sort of, you know, debriefing, and talking about how they felt, what they accomplished, did they get what they wanted out of it, so the entire process was an education in social justice from beginning to end.” (Participant 2B)

Another cultural/identity center director similarly explained the role of university employees as social justice facilitators, rather than activists themselves, within the university setting.

“…it's a fine line with what we can do as staff. We have to create a balance because we have to play the role of staff. We have to kind of push the students to mobilize and have that sense of activism, because we can't be activists as staff people, you know, working at a university, we can't do that, but social justice is definitely a part of our values, of our overall center.” (Participant 3B)

In addition to practices that subjects identified specifically as social justice practices, a significant number of activities mentioned fell within existing job duties but were seen as involving a social justice approach or in some way reflecting how the subject defined social justice. For example, one DEI director felt that the establishment of a DEI council at his university qualified as social justice. “[It] does focus largely on DEI,” he said, “but we’re beginning to dig a little bit deeper into the institutional practices to see if there are barriers in place that need be removed… I think we’ve got to take care of the DEI work before we can really manage all the social justice issues that may be on campus.” Others mentioned social justice-oriented ways of approaching existing processes such as hiring, institutional assessment, policy analysis, conducting investigations, and working with outside vendors.

A third of the subjects provided abstract descriptions along with specific activities when describing practices. One subject stated that there was “always a layer of social justice implied in the work that we do.” A second talked about “understanding the diversity within diverse identities” and “thinking more critically about needs,” a third talked about “always thinking about things in relation to the outside world,” and a fourth spoke about having a “transformational mindset, knowing and believing that anything can change” and a “future orientation mindset; it is important that people think about the
future as a social justice practice.” These statements seemed to reflect an attitude or position rather than a specific practice.

Overall, the subjects expressed more expansive and far-reaching ideas when discussing social justice than for DEI practices. Practitioners saw DEI as their daily work, and social justice as something beyond that, but also as something that they as individuals could bring into the work, use to transform their institutions, and leverage to move forward in imaginative ways.

**Success of Social Justice Practices.** Compared to their assessment of DEI practices, subjects seemed to feel their social justice practices achieved more success; eight of the twelve subjects responded affirmatively when assessing at least one of the practices they mentioned. One subject spoke of a student activist group she advises as being “really successful, and it energizes everybody.” Others mentioned feelings of optimism, people’s increased willingness to “make change,” and the positive effect of popular culture and digital media in supporting social justice perspectives.

Yet some of the affirmative responses were qualified; one subject said yes, but not as much as was needed due to “higher ed’s tendency to preserve tradition and change slowly, if at all.” Another said success was uncertain because “it’s hard to maintain energy, sustain over time, and finish what may have begun with emotion, anger, and protest.” And another added that they can be very successful, but if politicized, some people will “absolutely shut down.”

Some of the practices faced harsh opposition; one identity/cultural center director said, “I do see the public coming, you know, with backlash—we have a men's engagement group… and they talk about… toxic masculinity—and men would call and give threats.” Another talked about pushback against mandated diversity training for students at their institution that ultimately resulted in the training no longer being mandated for students, only encouraged.

Nine subjects felt uncertain about at least one of the practices they mentioned. Similar critiques emerged as during the discussion of DEI practices; namely that results can be difficult to measure or
determine, their success is subjective, or it’s too soon to tell. One identity/cultural center director wondered whether his work would persist after his tenure or be “torn asunder” by his successors. Another doubted whether localized success could last unless “real change happens societally” as well.

**Drawbacks of Social Justice Practices.** Moving from the discussion of their degree of success, the author probed deeper into subjects’ feelings about how social justice practices could be problematic. This discussion generated numerous distinct responses that illustrated perceived risks that could be divided into the following categories:

- criticism and backlash
- conflict and disagreement
- barriers or opposition (internal)
- barriers or opposition (external)
- slow, inconsistent, or insufficient progress
- unfair outcomes, infliction of harms, or trauma

As an example of criticism and backlash, one subject discussed how the phenomenon of “cancel culture, which some people view as social justice” can become “a mob mentality, and there’s no due process.” He went on to say,

“…if you're attacking people because of their social injustice, they're not going to change their behavior; you're actually going to drive them further into being socially unjust, you know, people that join what we would term hate groups, right, whether it’s the Proud Boys or whatever, they join those groups because they don’t feel like they have a place to belong. What's ironic about it is that… they feel that they need somewhere they can belong, because those people have identities as well.” (Participant 5A)

Later, this same subject added, “critics have undercut the meaning of social justice and/or the power and possibility of it, and I don’t know that we—those of us who engage in the work—have rearticulated that in a way that energizes people in the same way that it used to.” This subject’s comments possibly alluded to perceptions of social justice outside of the DEI profession that make it challenging to engage in such
practices even though all of the subjects in this study considered themselves to be social justice practitioners.

Pertaining to conflict and disagreement, one subject noted that it can be “problematic as to whose voice gets heard,” especially on digital platforms, and talked about conflicting ideologies that can confuse the issues, such as arguments in favor of freedom and personal liberties that activists have applied both to being pro-choice and wearing a COVID-19 mask, two completely separate debates. Free speech and misinformation also obfuscate social justice goals, as one subject pointed out, noting that authorship online without fact checking is “deeply problematic,” so while anyone can have a voice, there is no control over whose voices are being amplified or whether the information is correct.

Subjects mentioned external barriers, such as the North Carolina “bathroom bill” legislation that prohibited transgender individuals from using public restrooms for their gender, and institutional donors who influence universities to make decisions contrary to social justice, such as opposing hiring or tenure decisions for candidates of color for prominent positions. One DEI director felt that internal barriers also exist within institutions, and grassroots movements might not bring change in higher education because “the work will only be achieved if it’s part of the institution’s mission and values.”

As with traditional DEI practices, social justice practices also run the risk of not being as effective as hoped. One subject noted that social justice activity on campuses can ebb and flow with changes in student demands. Another noted that higher education institutions are hesitant to make bold adjustments; there is much “discussion and consensus-raising,” but a lag in decision-making about “things that would positively benefit our campus communities.” Another complained that “dysfunctional organizations thwart people’s abilities to enact social justice.”

And lastly, some subjects talked about undesirable outcomes, such as risks to personal safety, trauma, excessive emotional labor, fatigue, exhaustion, and disillusionment, which have spawned countless articles about self-care practices as necessarily going hand-in-hand with social justice practices.
Wider Implications of Social Justice

The next two questions asked participants to reflect on two major recent social justice milestones, the killing of George Floyd in 2020 the emergence and influence of the #BlackLivesMatter (2014) and #MeToo (2017) social media movements:

- In what ways have your thoughts on social justice and its importance or relevance to your work changed since the killing of George Floyd and the attention on police brutality?
- How do you perceive social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo in the context of how you do your work?

In asking these questions, the author sought to better understand whether recent events relating to social justice had altered the subjects’ work in any way. Did these developments accelerate or hinder the application of social justice in higher education, or did the work of DEI continue with minor impacts?

Considering the effects of events such as these could provide insights into how social justice activity outside of higher education affects its application within.

Effects After the Killing of George Floyd. When asked how the death of George Floyd, a Black man killed by police in Minnesota in 2020, affected subjects’ thoughts and work relating to social justice, nine of the twelve subjects said that the event actually had little effect on their own views and activities. Subjects viewed the event as another in a long line of unjust killings of people of color that only served to confirm that social justice does not yet exist in society and that the work must continue. One DEI practitioner stated,

“I’m still fascinated this was the one when all of a sudden everybody else was like, ‘Oh, this is the problem, we should do something about it, and I’ve talked to plenty of Black folks—friends, family, you know, acquaintances—that were like, why is this the one that changed everybody’s mind to start paying attention? Was it because we’re in a pandemic, and everybody was bored… like, what was it?’” (Participant 5A)
Three subjects recalled as an influential moment in their own lives when Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, was killed by George Zimmerman in 2012 and recounted the trauma of Zimmerman’s acquittal. Two others mentioned the riots that occurred in 1992, when police were acquitted after using excessive force on Rodney King, as a formative memory, one subject speculating about how social media helped social justice prevail for George Floyd.

“…the biggest difference between then and now, at least in my personal experience, was the spotlight it received because of social media, because in my mind, I think, what would have happened if iPhones were around when Rodney King happened, how much further in this movement would we be by now if that power existed to share his story?” (Participant 5B)

Despite the fact that most of the subjects seemed to have experienced a social justice awakening earlier in their lives, subjects conceded that the killing engendered feelings of urgency. One subject said that the Floyd killing “galvanized my thoughts and actions, providing more empowerment to move forward with the work I was already doing.” Another said he “felt different, on edge.” A DEI director said she felt a “personal pull to do the work.” And three directors said they now felt “less patient” in their work.

What did change to a great degree was their workload. Five subjects spoke about the tiring onslaught of work that occurred for DEI practitioners after the public protests and related media activity. One subject reflected that “this was not a new phenomenon for BIPOC folk, more of an awakening for white people.” A cultural/identity center director recalled an “uptick in the need for more education and protest, all while experiencing the trauma ourselves and trying to respond to others.” This director questioned how much of the increased demand for statements, training, and services was genuine and motivated by real desire for change and how much was performative. Another director said, “I didn’t even get a second to breathe.”

Amidst the deluge, subjects recalled feeling skeptical about the effect of all the activity, seeing it as somewhat reactive and not necessarily conducive to long-term change, while also feeling surprised and relieved by the later trial verdict when the police officer who killed Floyd was convicted. Half of the
subjects expressed hope that positive momentum would continue to accelerate and sustain DEI efforts and bring increased accountability.

**Effects of Social Justice Movements:** When considering the social media-based #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, subjects expressed thoughts aligning with two recurring themes: praise for the motivation and reasons behind the movements and hesitations about their combined viral phenomenon on social media, which simultaneously uplifts and threatens the movements through the openness of the platforms and their built-in algorithmic biases. One subject noted that the hashtags “might undercut the true meanings of things and detract from their actual purpose” by oversimplifying complex topics. Another saw the increased amount of engagement and public debate about social justice topics on social media as the embodiment of the “incredible and sheer force that grassroots and community organizing can create,” even while the “idea of a movement has changed from the past but still feels similar in that it compels and engages people… writing narratives much more clearly and quickly in the digital space.”

Two identity/cultural center directors pointed out that these movements represented the important application of critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of *intersectionality*, a prominent social justice (and higher education) framework over the last two decades, in that they center both the concerns of Blacks and women, as both movements were founded by Black women. As far as foregrounding major social justice issues, one DEI director remarked that the movements “bring a lot of visibility to the work to overcome racism and misogyny; they increase the number of people paying attention to them and connect them to larger things happening in society.” In the same vein, another director noted that their influence “kind of trickles down on campus” because “college is a microcosm of the real world,” and another confirmed, they “are integral to what we do,” raising awareness “that will ultimately lead to change in society.”

Among the ambivalent assessments, one subject feared that while they are “important to draw attention, some use the platforms for negativity that hurts both movements, and others label them terrorist
organizations.” Another decried the lack of “critical thinking, primary sources, and research… without substance or grounding,” and another disliked “how quickly these things can get away from us and turn into sort of a figurehead for the work and not quite the work itself.” Finally, another subject suggested that the attention and drama relating to the monetary holdings and inner workings of the movements distracted from their purpose.

**Perceived Conflicts and Synergies**

Thus far, study participants discussed their views of DEI and social justice mostly as distinct approaches. While some subjects merged ideas from both perspectives in their earlier responses about how they differentiated the two, the next questions attempted to learn how the subjects felt they could apply both perspectives to their work. Subjects responded to the following questions:

- Do you perceive conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices?
- Do you think DEI practitioners such as yourself should draw from both traditional DEI practices and social justice practices to achieve their goals? If so, how?
- Do you feel the institution or those to whom you report controls, limits, or modifies what you do?

**Conflicts.** While the literature has shown that several scholars have worked to differentiate DEI and social justice frameworks, the reality among practitioners appears less distinct. Subjects’ comments provided support for the ‘academic affairs vs. student affairs’ divide studied by LePeau, et al. (2018a; 2018b), but one identity/cultural center director felt the divide existed more between the institution and the community rather than within the institution itself.

“…there’s a student affairs side, and there is the academic side of things at a university, so that’s within a university, but then you have the grassroots side, like, within the community… so I don’t necessarily see that there is a conflict, but I think there’s sometimes a lack of a bridge… a lack of connection, between the university, or academia, really connecting with what is happening on the ground, within the community, and I think it’s a missed opportunity…” (Participant 3B)
A DEI director’s comments highlighted this same distinction, saying, “Social justice is a very established structure with roots in community organizing… whereas DEI is constantly evolving at a rapid pace within the institution.” One subject observed that DEI offices may have “more of an academic, intellectual basis, whereas student affairs can feel fluffy,” but it depends on the institution. He went on to say that this could possibly be countered if higher education curricula included more study of “marginal, critical theories and practices around race and how students are marginalized.”

While previous subjects found conflicts stemming from the context of the work (institution vs. community), most found conflict mainly in the ideologies. One DEI director explained,

“[Social justice] can be super aspirational.. and future focused, but it lacks logistics, right, it lacks an ability to actually implement those things… but oftentimes, with those more traditional DEI approaches, they can be so logistics-focused that they have no real vision… and it’s not necessarily driving things forward.” (Participant 1A)

One director acknowledged, “we are in conflict regularly, but I would say I just kind of like that.” Another held that conflict is a good thing, it is “natural,” and you learn through difference. One director readily acknowledged that social justice is more aggressive, more hands-on, and about “making people feel uncomfortable.” Another director said nearly the same thing, that social justice work is about “pushing the envelope, forcing us to step outside our comfort zone.” Going further, one identity/cultural center director was adamant that “social justice requires disruption, even if it makes our jobs difficult … it’s absolutely necessary because there is no current system the exists that allows for the type of world we want.” Another director went so far as to say that the idea of interest convergence is actually undesirable because it recalls a tenet of critical race theory: that historically, change has usually happened when “white interest is met,” meaning that maintaining white comfort (and avoiding conflict) has been the origin of many of the inequities that DEI currently attempts to rectify.

Another conflict can arise from a lack of long-term vision in DEI work. Providing student resources, such as counseling, tutoring, and other services, for example, as a DEI practice, but not going further to understand and eliminate the root causes of these needs lacks a social justice orientation,
suggested one subject. Another saw social justice as possibly causing conflict with DEI “because you need to go further than just representation.” Another echoed this thought: “when we think of DEI, we prioritize the quantity, versus the quality, and social justice, I feel, is the opposite of that.” Other conflicts centered around generational tensions, disagreements in the workplace, and burnout that occurs when practitioners feel they are fighting the same fight over and over again and doing it all for low pay.

**Synergies.** A few subjects found synergies, noting that both approaches generally work toward the same goals, even though they may employ different tactics to achieve them: “[H]ow do we create a society and a space in which we don’t diminish the voices and experiences of the folks we’ve harmed?”

**Drawing from Both Perspectives.** The next question examined whether practitioners felt both types of approaches should be used in their work. With this question, the author sought to tease out whether practitioners intentionally drew from both perspectives, or whether they observed a naturally occurring coexistence of approaches, as the latter could show a potential future in which social justice evolves and merges into higher education as a practice rather than being a disruptive force.

Responses to this question were emphatic, with several subjects responding with the word “absolutely” before speculating how this merging of approaches would (or did already) exist. Subjects who answered affirmatively followed up with comments of “I think it’s vital,” “they have to,” “they are never entirely separate,” “they are not “in their truest essence, any different,” “both are necessary,” “the language has become sort of interchangeable,” “you can’t have one without the other.” Although one subject admitted that he was “unsure how” to combine the two, he asserted that sometimes “you gotta push a little bit, like MLK did.” One DEI director summed it up best, saying,

“We all have the same mission, but we have different ways of getting there. It’s always within our best interest to use the best practice for the situation; each community is different, each institution is different, regions of the U.S. are different—one size does not fit all when it comes to DEI and social justice work.” (Participant 2A)
One DEI director observed that “when they work well together, you’re maximizing the vision of social justice that reimagines something, with the actual ‘this is how we’re going to do things’ of DEI.” He added, “Social justice helps push the DEI work forward, and DEI [practitioners] can take that vision and operationalize it.” One identity/cultural center director spoke poetically about how social justice “can be a framework for operations even though some folks perceive it as a mythical, unrealistic, or idealist approach to life, when in reality, it is a framework for reimagining the world that we live in—using radical imagination and imaginative liberation.” She later concluded, “[T]here is a connotation that in DEI, folks don’t think of it in terms of world building, or envisioning the end goal, rather than just the process of fixing an immediate problem. Social justice orients us to do progressive work toward a goal for the future.”

**Institutional Influence.** The final question in this section sought to discern to what extent institutions determine or limit the approaches that practitioners must use, and consequently, to what extent institutional influence could prevent DEI practitioners from achieving their goals. Most subjects indicated that their institutions interfered their work in one way or another, with the following mentions (listed in chronological order of collection during interviews with any subsequent mentions added to the total number of mentions indicated in parentheses):

- institutional hesitancy, resistance, caution, or delay (4)
- negative environment (2)
- feeling unsafe, unprotected, or unable to speak up (2)
- competing interests or power dynamics (2)
- not feeling supported or lack of commitment or resources (4)
- institution not aligning with or reflecting DEI goals
- bureaucracy or structural inefficiencies
- risk avoidance or “not wanting to disgruntle anyone” (3)
- bowing to external pressures such as government or trustees (5)
• lack of transparency
• short-term mindset

Two subjects mentioned positive influences:

• helping to incorporate DEI across the institution
• providing flexibility or autonomy

Further study would be needed to understand the extent to which institutional influence is a factor in determining the ways in which DEI practitioners approach their work, but it is clear from the number of limitations compared to positive influences in this study that it is a factor. Influences likely inhibit practitioners from selecting approaches that could jeopardize their work or employment and instead choose to maintain ones that are more likely to be (or have previously been) endorsed or supported by their institutions.

**Communication Methods**

The final set of questions is highly pertinent to the work of communicating about DEI in higher education. As a communicator in a DEI office for over twenty years, the author has observed the emergence of higher-level communication needs around DEI throughout that time. Initially working as a data processor, she edited a quarterly print newsletter and managed the website for the office. As digital capabilities and communications expectations grew, she transitioned to a communicator role and later began supervising a team that includes a writer, designer, and several social media and marketing student interns. Among the interview subjects in this study, those from larger schools typically worked with least one communicator within their DEI office; smaller schools relied on support from their universities’ central communications office, student interns, or outside vendors.

Learning about how DEI practitioners communicate about their work is key to helping them succeed, and by extension, helping their offices and institutions achieve their DEI mission and goals.
Equally important is the ability to communicate effectively and accurately using language and positioning that helps catalyze the desired outcomes. Subjects responded to the following questions:

- How do you communicate to your constituents about the work that you do?
- As you think about how your institution communicates about DEI, do you think it aligns with the work that you do?
- How closely are you involved with institutional messaging, either internal or external?
- Thinking about specific examples or situations that you can recall, how does your institution differ from yourself in terms of communicating about DEI?
- How do you feel the advent of digital media has affected the work of DEI and/or social justice?
- Do you think your institution uses social justice messaging?
- Do you feel an institution can communicate while drawing from both traditional DEI and social justice perspectives?

Communication Platforms. Subjects whose work focused on students tended to use social media and mobile texting applications to reach their constituencies, and those whose work focused on faculty and staff tended to use email and email newsletters, with some overlap. Subjects also mentioned institutional websites, web portals, annual reports, press releases, printed materials such as cards and magazines, and soft goods such as t-shirts.

Despite the prevalence of digital media, seven of the subjects said that face-to-face interaction is still one of their top communication methods, in the forms “basic conversations,” “getting in front of people,” meeting with individual stakeholders and administrators, building relationships, “tabling,” going to other offices’ events to connect with their constituents, and leveraging high-profile allies on campus as “collaborators and co-conspirators” to help promote their initiatives. One identity/cultural center director affirmed, “since so much of the work is community-based, in person networking is important and is now
resuming after the pandemic.” Two subjects mentioned the increasing importance and reach of Zoom for training sessions.

Three subjects interpreted the question asking “how” to mean the manner (in addition to the method) of communicating, mentioning the importance of transparency, clarity, confidentiality when necessary, directness around difficult or awkward topics, and tailoring communications to the needs of their audiences. One subject remarked that it is “difficult to get the word out” at his school because it’s very decentralized, and it’s difficult to get people’s attention unless it’s something “big and flashy.” Another agreed that it’s hard to make an impact due to the “information overload” on her campus.

**Alignment.** Knowing that the participants’ professional roles centered around DEI and not communications, the author wanted to learn whether their existing communications support adequately served their needs, or whether it was misaligned in any way. In other words, strategically positioning DEI offices is key, but if the available communication channels primarily serve other parts of the institution, it might be difficult to control the messaging they produce. Lack of dedicated communications support could particularly be an issue at smaller schools that have fewer resources.

Of the twelve subjects, four said there was good alignment, three said there was no alignment, and five gave a mixed response. The four who were in alignment included one DEI director in a CDO role, two other DEI directors, and one DEI-affiliated student affairs director. Of the three who were not in alignment, one is currently working with his university’s central communications office to plan a less reactive and more substantive communications strategy. Of particular concern was that communications lacked “the right language” and an authentic tone, stemming from a lack of awareness in the central communications office, which derived from a lack of diversity among the staff and an accompanying lack of understanding of marginalized groups and how to communicate inclusively that was “deeply frustrating.”
One director likened institutional communications to a funnel; “the higher up you are, the more broad you have to be with your statements.” Another DEI director agreed that while lower-level communications directly from the DEI office were good, the larger picture was lacking. Further support came from an identity/cultural center director who noted that messaging coming out of her institution’s DEI office seemed like an “intellectual exercise” concerned with data, decision-making, and policies but not the actual students with whom her office communicates. Another identity/cultural center director complained that her institution didn’t do nearly enough and needed to be more proactive. And two directors stated that their institutions seem to ignore important issues that needed to be addressed.

Involvement with Institutional Messaging. On the flip side of the alignment question, the author sought to determine whether the subjects held any influence over institutional messaging, which might extend to having the power to make decisions about DEI communications and affect outcomes. Almost all of the subjects, except for one in a CDO position and one DEI director in an education-oriented role, had limited involvement in crafting institutional DEI messaging and only minimal involvement in writing, reviewing, or providing feedback. Most called themselves “subject experts,” “secondary collaborators,” or someone only called on in a crisis situation relating to the particular area or identity group that they serve. In contrast, most of the subjects felt they had a high level of control over any messaging coming directly from their own offices.

How Institutional DEI Messaging Differs. To further extend how the subjects thought about the possible untapped potential or current frustrations of institutional-level DEI messaging, the interviewer asked subjects to reflect on how their institutions differ from how they themselves communicate about DEI. This question aimed to get into the core difference between how higher education institutions speak to their publics about DEI vs. how their own DEI practitioners, the subject matter experts, would do it, if they had control.
Subjects mentioned the following key differences between how their institutions communicate and how they would choose to communicate (listed in chronological order of collection during interviews with any subsequent mentions added to the total number of mentions indicated in parentheses):

- The institution delays its messaging due to overcaution, over-vetting, or fear. (2)
- The institution sends too few messages about DEI; there should be continuous dialogue, not just responding to incidents. (3)
- The institution doesn’t back up its statements with concrete action or follow-up. (2)
- The institution’s messaging isn’t sincere or authentic enough.
- The institution uses language that is too soft or indirect and omits anything that might offend.
- The institution’s DEI messaging isn’t prominent enough among other communications.
- The institution communicates as if its audience is monolithic. (2)

One point of interest among these findings is the growing prominence of DEI messaging on institutional websites. One director spoke of his goal to place DEI as a top-level menu item on his institution’s website as a symbol of its commitment to and transparency around DEI. This growing trend is a possible area of interest for future study and will undoubtedly provide substantial material for content analyses, along with the accompanying publication by many schools of expanded commitments to DEI, inclusive language guides, diversity dashboards, reporting, fundraising and other DEI-focused material.

**Digital Media’s Effects.** Even though some respondents discussed the impact of digital media in conjunction with social justice movements earlier in the interviews, the author took another opportunity to ask subjects about their opinions on digital media’s effects on DEI and social justice in the context of communicating about their work. The goals of this question were to find out how digital media has helped or hindered progress toward their goals.

This question produced a universal acknowledgment among the subjects that social media has made their work easier and better in a number of ways: moving the work forward faster; increasing the
“access, range, and speed of communications”; making it easier to reach affinity groups connected with their institution to “create a place where very specific conversations and perspectives” can exist; making the work more accessible to those who don’t know about DEI or social justice; providing more control and autonomy than institutional messaging channels; and allowing for more “nuanced gray space” when communicating about topics to inform and educate, since it’s often not considered an official university channel and can bypass length approval processes, be more explicit, and amplify marginalized voices.

Subjects also mentioned some of the same negative effects that surfaced in the earlier question, namely, the problems of inaccuracy, “noise,” and negativity on social media that are difficult to manage and can undermine the work; and the pressure to keep up with other institutions’ messaging.

Institutions’ Use of Social Justice Messaging. The author asked subjects to reflect on whether their institutions are already incorporating social justice language or perspectives in their messaging, and if so, to what extent. Although the literature did not yet show much evidence to that effect, the rapid increase in DEI messaging could signal that this is already happening.

Some responses indicated that some subjects are beginning to see “hints and subtle nods,” particularly in certain “pockets” within institutions, for example, in academic disciplines and campus sectors that center these processes, such as the humanities, social sciences, social work, education, student affairs, and even business, and less so at the top level of the institution. However, others found the notion laughable, particularly those in more conservative areas of the state. Subjects felt that this type of messaging is driven by student and community expectations, and if demand for change doesn’t exist, institutions can be “tone deaf.” One subject described waiting in a state of suspense to see how her institution would describe events such as racial tensions, police brutality, or the January 6, 2021 Capitol riots. One subject despaired that as a state-funded university, she didn’t think her school would ever be “the social justice activist that students want” even if it enacts “piecemeal applications of social justice” that show some progress. Another, who called her school “liberal,” said, “you definitely hear the language,” but conceded that there was “definitely room for improvement” and audiences push for more.
And finally, one director thought his school was “pretty savvy” at times, but he didn’t expect it to make any risky moves. He recalled a speaker event at his school that created controversy.

“…we had a speaker that came in, and … her parents were deported when she was in high school… so she wrote a book about deportation… and we brought her in, and I was like, oh yeah, this is good, everybody’s going to kind of get behind this, because this is her story. And there was a lot of criticism… basically saying we support open borders, and I was like, really? This is a speaker and she's telling her story, you know, but then people take it and they roll it around and make it what they want to make it… so, that's where we are now… ‘you support open borders,’ literally, it's what somebody said, and I was like, oh my God, really?” (Participant 2B)

This anecdote illustrates how a social justice practice of elevating and showcasing marginalized voices and stories can be interpreted as a controversial political stance, possibly undermining support for the underlying message, the group in question, the institution, and the social justice practice itself.

**A Dual Approach to Communication.** The interview ended with a final question about whether subjects believed that institutions can communicate using both traditional DEI and social justice approaches. The subjects all responded to this question affirmatively but to varying degrees, and it is of interest to analyze which of the practitioners tended to have a stronger inclination toward social justice to see if it aligns with LePeau, et al. (2018a; 2018b). Looking at the breakdown of DEI directors vs. DEI-affiliated student affairs directors in this study (as self-categorized), all six of the directors from the student affairs side had a strong inclination that both approaches are necessary. Of the directors from DEI offices outside of student affairs, three agreed, and three qualified their agreement that both approaches are necessary. Their stipulations included that there are moments when one is more appropriate than the other, that “you have to find a middle ground that will reach more people in an effective manner,” and that “being transparent about goals and processes is even more important.” From these responses, it is difficult to confirm whether these viewpoints stem from the subjects’ roles and places within their institutions, or from their personal experiences, beliefs, and motivations, but it could show more openness to social justice approaches coming from student affairs practitioners.
DISCUSSION

In the review of literature, it is clear that scholars not only perceive contrasts between how DEI and student affairs practitioners approach diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education but have also explored the reasons and circumstances behind it. In particular, LePeau, et al. (2018a; 2018b) delved into the question and found ample support for the divide between student affairs and academic affairs orientations based on how the employees are trained, how they conduct the work, for whom they do the work, and where their focus lies. With this in mind, the author set out to gain information correlating to the research questions presented earlier in this study about what guides the work of DEI practitioners, how the work is done, how it is communicated, and to what extent practitioners perceive conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices. The author also sought to examine practitioners’ work from a communications perspective to understand how institutional DEI offices can best position themselves to draw from both types of practices.

From the in-depth interviews, it became clear that individual DEI practitioners on both sides had a deep, personal stake in the goals of DEI and a willingness to embrace both DEI and social justice practices, regardless of their training or place within the institution. Seemingly interchangeably, those in DEI offices and in DEI-affiliated positions within student affairs had diverse origin stories as well as unique career paths that included experience in both realms at multiple institutions and in a variety of roles. Their individual stories bore witness to the primary motivation of DEI practitioners for doing the work: to help make higher education more accessible and equitable for those who might be unfairly denied that opportunity. Perspectives did not seem be limited to vocational factors.

It should be noted that LePeau’s work was based on content analyses of institutional websites, which perhaps paint a clearer picture of how institutional communicators position the efforts of campus contingents. In the author’s study, subjects seemed willing to consider and employ a variety of approaches, but what might be published on an institutional website is another matter entirely. However,
one aspect of LePeau’s work that cannot be overlooked in the context of this study is its examination of institutional structures.

**Where the Divide Truly Lies.** Perhaps the key findings from this study are not within the comparison of the two approaches and who chooses to use them, but in the later questions asked about conflicts and synergies at the institutional level. Subjects spoke about the divide between the institution and the community, or the wider world outside of academia, which exist both as influences and forces against each other. For example, when major events such as social media activism or the killing of George Floyd occur, both spheres are affected but respond in different ways, reacting and working to ameliorate and absorb the impacts.

The concept of the institution as the limiter, rather than any specific ideology, was exposed further through the questions in this study about institutional influence, to which subjects responded with a range of obstacles that would seem to affect progress more than the selection of the type of approach chosen, especially after all of the subjects readily spoke in depth about their personal commitments to social justice. Most frequently mentioned as a limiter were institutional hesitancy, resistance, caution, or delay; lack of support, commitment, and resources; and bowing to external pressures, all of which would seem to point to institutions shying away from social justice-oriented work more than any of the individual DEI practitioners. In light of the literature on the increasing volume of social justice research emerging from the academic disciplines shown in Patton, et al. (2010), it might be more informative to reframe the examination as one between the academic side of the university vs. the administrative (or institutional) side, which is perhaps more likely to be risk-averse than the DEI functions, and following from that, the issue of central communications offices being more likely to serve and represent the top level of the university than its DEI office or student affairs units.

While an explicit divide may not exist among individual practitioners, it is clear that social justice approaches do incur risk, as evidenced by the list of drawbacks cited by interview subjects when asked how social justice approaches could be problematic. The list provides support for the idea of the
institution as a barrier to social justice because the institution avoids risk to protect its interests, whether they be reputational, financial, or situational. The institution moves slowly, resists change, and faces barriers in the form of forces that protect the interests of its beneficiaries, which historically, are the dominant groups. In effect, the argument against social justice practices reduces to the age-old problem of systemic injustice that perpetuates existing power structures; if DEI offices might seem less likely than student affairs offices to use social justice approaches from an overall, institutional perspective, it might be because they are higher up the chain, closer to the administration, and therefore, more likely to support and reinforce that power structure.

**How to Move Forward.** Knowing that opposition and barriers to both DEI and social justice efforts exist within the institution, it is important for DEI practitioners and those who communicate on their behalf to understand the differences in perspectives and where one type of approach may have a greater chance for success and/or impact. For this purpose, interview responses to the question of how subjects differentiate the two approaches is useful. If, as subjects suggested, social justice is more action-oriented, more forward-thinking, and more progressive, then opportunities may increasingly arise within the course of the work where a social justice-oriented approach is most appropriate and helpful for moving the institution forward, assuming risks are manageable. Knowing the social justice theories and frameworks that have emerged over the past few decades can only help both DEI practitioners and communicators to expand their toolkits with diverse ways of knowing and doing.

In addition, the interviews with subjects illustrated some simple truths about DEI work that are useful to retain as hallmarks of the work as it exists today. For example, despite the prevalence of digital media, marginalized communities still depend heavily on personal connections between individuals as a primary means of doing the work. Differences in approaches also determine their limitations in specific situations; for example, practitioners would do well to remember that DEI practices are often characterized by broad, structural, incremental change that may move slowly and cautiously, while social justice practices may demand accountability, provoke criticism, or encounter more opposition.
As Lambe (2020) suggests, DEI officers must employ a multi-partial approach that seeks to avoid harm and centers care; this idea was also mentioned by one interview subject who noted that while social justice can mean being actively critical, it must come “from a place of care” for the perspectives of others. While Thornton, et al. (2020) called for “nothing less than disruption” to dismantle systemic inequities, disruption does not necessarily mean harm. And where Warikoo and Deckman (2014) recognized the difficulty of developing a model that supports both goals, it does not seem impossible, especially when one considers that the field of DEI itself is about embracing multiple perspectives. Practitioners must make space for potential conflict and discomfort so that it doesn’t erupt into discord or violence and synergies can have the space to develop.

While Frey and Palmer (2014) held that communication is in itself a form of activism, we must go further toward the co-orientation model (Bronn & Bronn, 2003) as the most instructive conceptual framework for ways to reconcile complex and contentious issues among multiple stakeholders. With its three-step process of reflection, inquiry, and advocacy, it provides communicators a way to interpret the needs of various constituencies and present them in the most advantageous ways possible for all of the stakeholders that they represent. At the very least, its ladder of inference enables communicators to understand and present multiple viewpoints and identify commonalities, even when there is no clear single point of view. In today’s climate, the only way forward may be one where multiple perspectives advance together, not with one approach, but with many, fighting together for social justice simultaneously with a range of tactics and messages. To summarize, the author provides the following takeaways from this study:

**RQ1: What guides the work of DEI practitioners in higher education?** While individual higher education DEI practitioners may vary in terms of their views on traditional DEI practices and social justice practices, a commitment to both exists at the root of much of institutional DEI work. Individual choice may guide situational decisions relating to the types of approaches they employ, but institutional factors appear to play a larger role than individual ones in determining the types of approaches DEI
professionals choose to accomplish their work. Communicators are influenced by these same institutional factors.

**RQ2: How do DEI professionals do their work, and how is it communicated?** DEI practitioners do not necessarily choose approaches based on type of approach, but rather their appropriateness or suitability in a given situation. For both DEI practitioners and communicators, it is crucial to gain a deep understanding of the different approaches, how they can be applied in varying situations based on the levels of support, opposition, and/or risk that exist, and how to apply a co-orientation model to educate and inform others of the options.

**RQ3: To what extent do practitioners perceive conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices?** Practitioners do not necessarily perceive conflicts between types of practices, as both traditional DEI practices and social justice practices support their missions. However, they do perceive drawbacks in ineffectiveness, opposition, and/or risk of different approaches, depending on the situation, more so than in their orientation as a traditional DEI practice or social justice practice.

**RQ4: How can institutional DEI offices best position themselves to draw from both traditional DEI practices and social justice practices to achieve their goals more effectively?** The unpredictability of societal events and developments, along with the uniqueness of institutional contexts, can provide opportunities to greatly advance the missions of equity and inclusion in higher education if DEI practitioners position themselves to leverage moments of opportunity by continually using a cycle of reflection, inquiry, and advocacy (as developed in the co-orientation model); considering multiple approaches; and being ready to move forward in those moments with the most appropriate tactic. In addition, DEI practitioners and communicators can add the following practices to their work to attain greater likelihood of success:
• Keep up with emerging research on DEI practices and social justice practices to understand the similarities and differences between them and to be able to employ them as tactics when needed.

• Understand the historical and present-day limitations of, support for, and opposition to both types of practices in past and current contexts to better gauge their likelihood of success in a given time and place.

• Consider multiple approaches toward achieving DEI goals and, as a social justice practice, communicate to educate audiences about the different approaches, along with their benefits and drawbacks, with an openness to using more than one approach to help achieve success.

**Practical Applications.** Communicators can and should aim to help grow the field of DEI communications, a specialty area that could provide education about the needs, opportunities, and potential pitfalls of the contexts in which they work. Doubtless, as global demographics change, power balances shift, and majority interests erode, the field of DEI communications will grow organically. However, communicators who grasp and manage these dynamics earlier will provide an advantage for their institutions and constituents. Suggestions to maximize effectiveness include:

• continued research on DEI and DEI communication practices, including case studies
• development of training and resources for DEI communication professionals
• establishment of a category at DEI and communications conferences to share the work
• establishment of coursework within graduate-level communication programs focusing on DEI
• creation of DEI interest groups within professional communications organizations

To communicate effectively with all of their audiences, institutions should recognize that their approach to DEI can determine whether they succeed. Equipping communicators with an understanding of DEI practices can position institutions as change agents and forces for good rather than as the reactionary entities plagued by the missteps, backlash, and criticism documented earlier in the literature.
Limitations and Future Research

A major consideration not investigated within this study is the changing scope of public dialogue and values that creates forces of change in higher education. It is difficult to predict the cycles of stasis and progress that alternate throughout history; for example, conditions that led to the Civil Rights Movement 50 years ago paved the way for the conceptualization and implementation of DEI that has grown over the following decades. What external forces or major events will allow or prevent institutions from moving forward in creating more equitable campus environments? This uncertain impetus for change makes prediction difficult, but as social justice approaches increasingly become part of public discourse, they may continue to be an accelerant of change, both in higher education and society.

Another consideration is this study’s use of in-depth interviews taken from a small geographic region that may reflect perspectives that differ from other parts of the country. Campus demographics, governmental policy, and prevailing attitudes may differ markedly by region or by institution, so the findings of this study could be less applicable in other contexts. With this in mind, the author attempted to generate as rich a discussion of the research questions as possible. While the stories of interview subjects are undoubtedly unique, they provide concepts, insights, and themes that, while by no means a complete picture of all of the possibilities that exist, nonetheless include issues and themes that are important to consider. A survey of DEI practitioners across more institutions could provide a broader range of insights nationally.

The findings of this study included mention of a wide range of DEI and social justice practices, which suggests the need for future studies centering the different types of stakeholders who are the beneficiaries of these practices, such as students, administrators, and other university community members, to determine how successful they are in supporting and achieving DEI goals within their
institutions. Further study of how these practices manifest, succeed, and fail across various facets of higher education could be informative.

It should also be noted that the author initially planned to include subjects from two smaller institutions of less than 2,000 students each in this study, but a lack of availability of potential subjects at those schools resulted in substitution of two larger schools. Future study could examine the ability of smaller institutions to achieve their DEI goals.

CONCLUSION

This study examined attitudes about DEI and social justice practices by practitioners in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Initially seeking to discern whether practitioners’ tendency to embrace social justice-oriented approaches aligned with their training, role, and placement within the institution, instead the study revealed the existence of social justice awareness and commitment among all the subjects along with a range of institutional forces and individual factors that either inhibit or allow the application of social justice-oriented approaches. Rather than depending on specific practitioners’ aims and goals, the application of social justice approaches more likely stems from a number of institutional, environmental, and societal factors that comprise the localized higher education climate in which they work.
APPENDIX

In-Depth Interview Guide

The following moderator guide was used as a basis for the in-depth interviews in this study.

Purpose and Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study on DEI communication practices in higher education. This study will investigate perspectives and opinions about what drives your work in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The information you provide will be kept completely confidential. Your name and position title will not be used, and direct quotes will only be included in reports if the speaker cannot be identified.

With that in mind, I hope that you will feel free to share your personal insights as completely as possible. We have scheduled 60-90 minutes for this interview, but the time is flexible and can be shorter; or, if we need more time, we can schedule a continuation of this interview at a later date. The information we collect today will be valuable for learning what drives the work of DEI professionals in the field today. Your responses are very much appreciated.

With your permission, I will be recording this interview to help recall what was said. No one will have access to the recordings except for the interviewer (myself). I may also take a few notes for the same purpose.

As you answer my questions, please know that I’m interested in your honest responses. There are no right or wrong answers, and identifying information will be removed from the transcripts.
Questions

Role

What is your professional role, and what does it encompass?

What led you to this work?

What would you say guides your work today in the field of DEI in higher education?

DEI Practices

How do you define diversity, equity, and inclusion?

If you think back over your career, what are some types of DEI practices that you have helped to implement or carry out in the field of higher education?

Do you feel these practices have been successful?

Social Justice Practices

How do you define social justice?

How would you differentiate social justice practices from DEI practices?

If you think back over your career, what are some types of social justice practices that you have helped to implement or carry out in the field of higher education?

Do you feel these practices have been successful?

What are some drawbacks to social justice practices, either in higher education institutions or in society?

In what ways have your thoughts on social justice and its importance or relevance to your work changed since the killing of George Floyd and the attention on police brutality?
How do you perceive social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo in the context of how you do your work?

**Perceived Conflicts and Synergies**

Do you perceive conflicts between traditional DEI practices and social justice practices?

Do you think DEI practitioners such as yourself should draw from both traditional DEI practices and social justice practices to achieve their goals? If so, how?

Do you feel the institution or those to whom you report controls, limits, or modifies what you do?

**Communication Methods**

How do you communicate to your constituents about the work that you do?

As you think about how your institution communicates about DEI, do you think it aligns with the work that you do?

How closely are you involved with institutional messaging, either internal or external?

Thinking about specific examples or situations that you can recall, how does your institution differ from yourself in terms of communicating about DEI?

How do you feel the advent of digital media has affected the work of DEI and/or social justice?

Do you think your institution uses social justice messaging?

Do you feel an institution can communicate while drawing from both traditional DEI and social justice perspectives?
Wrap-Up

Do you have anything more to add?

Conclusion

That ends our time for this session. Thank you very much for your participation in this study.
REFERENCES


