STRADDLING THE LINE: VPSA PERSPECTIVES ON PRIORITIZING SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

Jemilia S. Davis
UNC Chapel Hill

Abstract

Vice Presidents of Student Affairs (VPSAs) lead in a context nuanced around race that conflicts with their duty to enact the student affairs profession's espoused values of social justice and inclusion. This paper summarizes findings from a critical qualitative case study conducted with 10 VPSAs from a diverse group of institutions located in the southeastern region of the U.S. The findings reveal how VPSAs *straddle the line* between prioritizing student success for students of color and serving their historically exclusive institutions.

Keywords: leadership; race; student affairs; student success

Please direct inquires about this manuscript to: Jemilia Davis, jemilia_davis@unc.edu

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Inequity is the thread that weaves our past and present together tightly enough to persist beyond the demands of change. People are at the helm of decisions that sustain or dismantle this fabric. During difficult times, many wrestle between making decisions that sustain the comfort of the flawed familiar or dismantle the norm to uplift historically underserved and overlooked populations. As a microcosm of society, higher education mimics these behaviors with educators who straddle the line between sustaining and dismantling racism within collegiate environments. In higher education, educators approach equity from varying levels of understanding, with critically conscious educators feverishly advocating for students in a paradoxical context (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; McNair et al., 2020). Vice Presidents of Student Affairs (VPSAs) are uniquely positioned to lead their student affairs divisions in a professional setting in which excluding racially minoritized groups is commonplace while simultaneously representing a profession that values social justice and inclusion.

The historical legacy of exclusion characterizes the experiences of those who participate in higher education, especially for individuals from Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, and low-income backgrounds. Several reports and publications capture the slow progress towards equitable postsecondary outcomes for Students of Color (SoCs) (e.g., Espinosa et al., 2019; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Slow progress upholds a campus environment that is not conducive to inclusive excellence for SoCs (Ladson-Billings, 2006; McNair et al., 2020). College administrators are stewards who ensure that collegiate environments support and promote equitable success, especially for students from racially marginalized groups (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; Kezar, 2012; McNair et al., 2020; Patton et al., 2007). VPSAs are of unique interest because of their primary responsibility to advocate for their increasingly diverse student body (Harper, 2019; Harper & Patton, 2007; Reason & Broido, 2017). This critical qualitative case study explored 10 VPSAs' perspectives on prioritizing positive outcomes and experiences for SoCs on their campuses.

Literature Review

Higher education was founded on the laurels of offering narrow access that primarily excluded prospective students based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Wechsler, 2007). It is well documented that the lingering culture of exclusion impacts the equity gap in achievement we observe today (Espinosa et al., 2019; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Celebrated policy measures over the years, like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), have promoted equal access to education; however, these attempts to improve equity, close achievement gaps, and pay education debts are not enough for more racially and gender-diverse student populations. White men from high socioeconomic backgrounds continue to experience the benefits of postsecondary education at a higher rate than their peers (Espinosa et al., 2019).

As postsecondary institutions became more diverse, the importance of professionals tending to the needs of the increasingly diverse student population was filled by the earliest student affairs professionals—Deans of Women and Deans of Men, later becoming Deans of Students (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). At key moments during social movements, student affairs professionals represent the voices of students among other administrators. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, Deans of Students kept campus leadership informed of students' racialized experiences and perspectives, which often led to a radical change on their campuses (Gaston-Gayles et al., 2005). Today, as evidenced by the documented support of racial justice, student affairs professionals continue to publicly acknowledge how racism is embedded in their campus environments (ACPA, 2017; NASPA, 2016). However, despite the profession's intent to hold institutions accountable for enact-

ing social justice values and developing critical consciousness, translating this consciousness into action is still necessary to address the racial inequity on campuses (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; Harper & Patton, 2007; Patton et al., 2007).

The history of higher education highlights VPSAs as senior-level administrators whose salient priority is to foster a campus climate in which all students can succeed (Harper, 2019; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014; Wilson & Wolverton, 2011). A majority of VPSAs report directly to the president of their institution, while others report to the provost, which signifies that their insight is valued in institutional decision-making (Wilson, 2017). VPSAs also represent a profession within which social justice and inclusion are recognized as professional competencies central to their practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). These competency areas refer to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward "creating learning environments that foster equitable participation" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 14). If abiding by professional competencies, VPSAs are positioned with the power to transform racial climates on campus.

Practitioner knowledge is significant when studying equity in student outcomes (Bensimon, 2007). Student affairs professionals are practitioners called to address racial concerns with no clear answers or perfect interventions, which leads student activists to perceive them as less helpful (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; Rosati et al., 2019). Scholars acknowledge the importance of institutional agents who play a direct role in transforming racial climate regardless of their position title or leadership rank (Bensimon, 2007; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; McNair et al., 2020). VPSAs are expected to value social justice and inclusion as they lead the student affairs professionals at their institutions. Their professional values and beliefs signal a hopeful change agent on our campuses, especially for VPSAs who report directly to an institution's president. This is important because, as Bensimon (2005) suggests, "The problem with unequal outcomes resides within individuals, in the cognitive frames that govern their attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions (p. 100)."

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a valuable theoretical framework and analytic tool to dissect the racial underpinnings of inequity in education and, more specifically, student affairs (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). This theory emerged from critical legal scholars during the civil rights era who recognized the persistence of race as an integral factor in determining law and policy outcomes (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT has been applied to the context of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), reviewed in higher education research (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015), utilized to challenge student development theory (Patton et al., 2005), and has served as a lens to disrupt institutionalized racism in postsecondary institutions (Patton, 2016). Utilizing CRT as an analytical framework guided the study's intent to critically evaluate the efforts made by VPSAs when prioritizing the success of SoC at their institutions.

The tenets of CRT include (a) the permanence of racism, (b) whiteness as property, (c) counter-storytelling, (d) interest convergence, (e) intersectionality, (f) the critique of liberalism, and (g) commitment to social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Intersectionality across race and gender emerged in the unique experiences of participants who identified as Women of Color, which highlighted Crenshaw's (1991) theory as it was personified in Breeden's (2021) study on Black women in the senior-level positions. The findings call specific attention to how VPSAs utilized interest convergence, intentionally and unintentionally, to promote success for SoCs. Interest convergence characterizes the motivations of white people who support racial justice only when they can also benefit from it (Bell, 1980; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Bell (1980) described the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)

case as an example of interest convergence that represented a cross-section of law and education. Bell argued that the results of this decision were not made without acknowledging that it had benefits for the white majority. Thus, no decision that seemingly benefits a racialized minority group is made simply considering morals alone.

Methodology

Critical race theory, qualitative inquiry, and case study design were integral components to the research methods for this study. The primary intent of critical research is to spark change or, at minimum, incite critical reflection (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018; Pasque et al., 2017). To explore VPSAs' experiences, a qualitative case study was conducted to gather rich and holistic descriptions to provide contextual perspectives (Pasque et al., 2017). The primary source of data collection was semi-structured interviews conducted using Zoom, although collected artifacts also contributed to an in-depth description of the context that informs the VPSAs' professional practice. Various documents were collected and analyzed to provide institutional context, including organizational charts, enrollment percentages, retention and graduation demographics, and student affairs' mission and vision statements. These documents were supplemented by articles in student-run newspapers, diversity strategic plans, and websites, as they were available and relevant.

Participants from this study were recruited from the Southern Association of College Administrators (SACSA), an affiliate of NASPA's Region III group. In this study, VPSAs were defined as senior-level administrators who lead an institution's student affairs division and report to the institution's president. The following criteria were used to identify participants: (a) a minimum of two years experience in a VPSA role at their current institution, (b) employed by a historically white institution, and (c) earned their most recent degree in education at an accredited institution. These criteria guided purposeful and network sampling to gather information for this case study. This study included 10 participants who represented baccalaureate, master's level, and doctoral level institutions across Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Participants ranged in years of experience in the student affairs field from 10 to 43 years, and all earned a graduate degree in education. The racial demographics of the participants were representative of census data collected in 2014 (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014), with seven participants identifying as white and three participants identifying as people of color. The participants included five participants who identified as women and five who identified as men. Intersectional identities are not shared to protect the confidentiality of each participant who, as the sole VPSA for each institution, could be easily identified with combined information about the institution type, location, and racial identity.

The data from this study was guided by three phases of qualitative data analysis. During the first step, the data were prepared for analysis by reading transcribed interviews, organizing notes, and deciding which information would be used for analysis. Attention was given to the artifacts participants referenced, and this guided the data collection while preparing for analysis. To maintain confidentiality, the names of individuals, locations, and institutions were replaced with pseudonyms across all data. A research journal proved to be most helpful with this phase. Next, the reflections, interview transcripts, and division artifacts were uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software which launched the second and third phases of data exploration and data reduction in the study. CRT guided the initial coding process for the study. A blind peer review of a de-identified transcript was conducted, to elicit emerging themes that aligned with the initial findings.

Trustworthiness

Patton (2015) provided a checklist of ethical

considerations for researchers to use when conducting qualitative research. The checklist guided systematic data collection and analysis throughout the research design and methods. Specific strategies, including credibility and confirmability, ensured trustworthiness during this project (Patton, 2015). Member checks were conducted by sharing an outline of themes gathered from the transcripts of VPSA participants' interviews, and they were asked to confirm whether the themes reflected their experiences. I shared an outline of themes from the analysis with VPSA participants and received confirmations that the themes reflected their experiences. I also presented the findings to a closed group meeting of VPSAs and other senior-level leaders during which I also received positive and affirming feedback on the description of their experiences and the critical analysis. Additionally, confirming or disconfirming data from various artifacts and the interview transcripts were used to support the proposed findings. Researcher positionality as a Black woman scholar-practitioner in higher education was considered to identify how my personal experiences and worldviews influenced the collection and analysis processes.

Findings

VPSAs play an integral role in creating inclusive environments that foster holistic learning and development for all students and promote success for SoCs (Harper & Patton, 2007; Wilson & Wolverton, 2011). The study's findings revealed that a VPSA's effort to prioritize SoCs on their campus is nuanced and may contribute to a premature celebration of best practices to support SoCs, rather than the restless equity-minded practice required to challenge the status quo of centering whiteness (Bensimon, 2005; Harper, 2019; McNair et al., 2020). Artifacts and descriptive data unveiled a portrait of the nuanced context within which the VPSAs worked. This was coupled with perspectives shared about their experiences leading an area that values social justice and inclusion within a larger culture that reflects the legacy of exclusion. These perspectives provided an in-depth look into the complexities of VPSA leadership.

College Environment

VPSAs perform their roles and responsibilities in a college environment that often wrestles with its historical legacy regarding racial exclusion. Racism's historical legacy exemplifies CRT's race permanence tenet and provides a window to how SoCs have historically experienced their campus environments that precede the challenges faced today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Charles shared, "In this research, I think [institutional culture] is really important [to] embrace who we are and the time we are in. We don't escape our history, so we grow and learn from there." For example, even after over 50 years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, the convoluted progress and history of exclusion linger on today's campuses in the form of building names and historic monuments. In 2017, students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill demanded administrators remove the Silent Sam monument, honoring a Confederate soldier, because it simultaneously represented those who fought for the enslavement of Black people (Reilly, 2017). Counter-protests also call attention to the historical legacy of exclusion. In the same year, members of a white nationalist group marched in Charlottesville and on the University of Virginia's campus with torches as they made racist and neo-Nazi outcries (Heim, 2017). In the years that followed, the student outcry was elevated and more widespread when the nation faced a racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Undoubtedly, the loss of lives to police brutality uncloaked the permanence of racism and anti-Blackness in our society, making higher education just one target for its impact.

Students have called attention to racism in higher education in recent protests across the nation; however, public incidents in the southeast-

ern region were like incidents that occurred at the participating VPSAs' institutions. VPSAs acknowledged that counter-protests also call attention to the historical legacy of exclusion. Events such as these at some of the oldest American colleges remind college students of this historical legacy of exclusion. Student affairs mission statements are data points that the student affairs divisions and the larger institutions have, which include varying levels of recognizing, at minimum, the different needs across the student population and the unlikely event of acknowledging race permanence.

Insight into the student affairs culture can be captured by the mission statements that guide how VPSAs lead their divisions and hold their supervisees accountable for working with students. Although analyzed, the full mission statements are not included as part of the study to preserve confidentiality. The overarching focus of the mission statements is to create an environment on campus that fosters student learning and development and emphasizes how the student affairs divisions are student-focused and complement the institution's mission. The language in the mission statements for the student affairs divisions represented in this study does not prioritize SoCs or other marginalized groups that may be represented on a college campus. References to supporting all students, creating welcoming campuses, and fostering inclusive environments suggest some awareness that there are groups of students who have varying experiences from the majority, and the institutional structures are not organically supportive, welcoming, or inclusive. Overall, the mission statements suggest that these student affairs divisions consider the varying students' needs that enhance their experiences and prepare them for postsecondary success.

Participants discussed their difficulty addressing the historical legacy of the institution and influencing other departments out of their purview. Participants shared how what they did within their student affairs divisions regarding strategic plans and mission statements, was not always mimicked on the larger institutional level. One example, which captured the nature of this struggle, was illustrated when Elizabeth shared an experience about mediating between her students and the president. She shared,

> When we had our campus-wide conversations around the State flag, that was a really tough navigation. Because on the one side, the students made very clear and strong and correct arguments about their position... Then the president is on this other side, trying to navigate this political part of it. [I was] trying to communicate both those perspectives to each other. [I went] back to the students, back to the President, and then the reverse of that. That was rough!

This *back and forth* between students and senior leadership is unique to VPSAs. Elizabeth later described this as straddling the line when she said, "We might have a discussion at the cabinet about the conflict that was happening at the state level but no one else on the cabinet is straddling that line."

Advocating for Students

VPSAs advocate for SoCs by empowering their division to support SoCs and promoting race-centered programs. In the context of their historically exclusive institutions, VPSAs find a way to advocate for SoCs by leading and supporting their divisions to promote their success. When VPSAs promote and encourage affirming practices, programs, and relationships for SoCs, their divisions recognize that SoCs experience their college environment differently from white students. In this study, VPSAs affirmed SoCs and supported the development of strategic initiatives through strategic plans and programs to improve success among SoCs. VPSAs provided rationales for their programs that were tied to institutional success metrics. For example, programs geared towards SoCs were justified as an effort to address enrollment concerns and increase overall retention rates. Southern State's VPSA mentioned, "If we want to

grow our enrollment, then one of the ways that we can do that is by being more effective in our outreach and support of Latinx students". During their comments, VPSAs suggested that, because of the increasingly diverse populations across the country, intentional efforts in recruiting SoCs are often an institution's only way to increase their enrollment.

At the time of this study, three of the institutions had strategic plans, explicitly focused on diversity initiatives, while artifacts were collected about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that were hosted by the student affairs division. The diversity strategic plans encompass specific measurable goals for providing support and resources to promote success for SoCs. In some cases, these plans have been implemented and can be observed, in action, on their institutions' websites. Atlantic University provides a three-phased diversity strategic plan that outlines specific measurable goals to create an educational program for faculty and staff about what has occurred on campus and the plans for follow-up. Meanwhile, race-based programs and student organizations were supported by all VPSAs who participated in this study. At South River University, Ann led an effort to develop a program for Men of Color on her campus in response to data that demonstrated this subset of the college population was demonstrating inequitable outcomes in their coursework. Ann supported her division to coordinate a mentorship program and academic tutoring, which involved external and internal partners. The time and resources devoted to this program in a resource-scarce environment was an intentional commitment on behalf of Ann and her division. Unfortunately, despite its success with the students involved, the program had limited resources that could only support a subset of the group of students included in the data that prompted the program.

The exclusivity of providing opportunities for SoCs to participate in programs, that are proven successful, continuously demonstrates the culture of exclusion that characterizes higher education. Mary alluded to this exclusivity of access to their programs when she said, "I can look at our African-American male initiative, but that's an n of 25 each year. And that's far greater, but when you look at the resources that are dedicated, how do we scale it?". Mary's example is reflective of other VPSAs, who shared how their programs were for a subgroup of students rather than available to all or were required for all to engage in. Similarly, at Plain Ridge, the Scholars program that gives conditional admission to a majority of SoCs, is only open to a small group of students. Programs that reflect best practices in offering SoC support are often limited to a certain number of students, leaving the remaining students, who may demonstrate similar inequitable experiences on campus, without access to the intensive and meaningful programs the divisions provide. This is a key example of how VPSAs straddle the line by attempting to do the best with what they are provided at their institutions.

Engaging with Cabinet Leadership

VPSAs carefully assert perspectives of race around the president and their colleagues. In this study, all participants report directly to the president or chancellor at their university. Thomas emphasized the importance of reporting to the president. He said,

> I do think that's the difference between someone reporting to a President and a provost. I think I'm lucky enough that I report to a President, and in reporting to a President, I have one-on-ones with the President. That could be the biggest difference, between reporting to a provost and a President, for making that cultural change.

Based on the organizational charts, VPSAs who participated in this study sit alongside the senior-level leaders for academic affairs, finance, advancement, and athletics in a president's cabinet. VPSAs described their role, similarly to Ann, who

explained her primary responsibility as an "advocate for students and to help student success." A position on the president's cabinet can provide an opportunity for VPSAs to engage with the president on a regular basis and, thus, build a relationship that levies their ability to utilize power to make change.

Thomas directly described how the relationship with the chancellor mitigates a VPSA's work when he said, "your Chancellor has a lot to say about how effective we are at Student Affairs." Ann recalled dealing with a contentious protest on campus regarding race and how the chancellor supported her in the decisions she made to support and guide the students. "I was in the thick of it from an administrative perspective because my Chancellor put me in it. But I give him credit. He blocked and tackled for me and we walked side-by-side in this fight." Access to the president as direct reports facilitates trusting relationships and access to sharing SoCs' perspectives and experiences. Thomas' relationship and access to the president allow for engaging dialogue around student success, during which they earn their ability to be viewed as a confidant and expert on the student experience on the cabinet. However, being a direct report not only provides access to the president, but it also includes interactions with cabinet peers who demonstrate varying perspectives about racial inequity.

During the interviews, VPSAs discussed the challenges that limit their power to influence change when working with their cabinet peers. VPSAs shared numerous reasons as to why these challenges exist. For example, Ann identified the lack of diverse leadership as a barrier to her ability to exercise her power on campus. She said,

> I think another barrier is, unfortunately, the numbers or the lack thereof … In this case, I am it, as far as senior leadership at this institution. I'm the only [Person of Color]. That's a barrier and it's ridiculous, actually.

As a Woman of Color, Ann faces increased challenges to move her voice centerstage amidst a leadership that consists of predominately white men. The intersection of her racial and gender identities, both being marginalized in this setting, exacerbates her efforts to contribute to decision-making and advocate for SoCs.

Catherine believes challenges emerge because the cabinet does not regularly interact with students. She said,

> I think that most of these folks on the president's cabinet don't engage on a regular basis with students. I think that they would think about student success broadly and not … thinking about the needs that other student populations, particularly SoCs, have that might be different or in addition to the general student body.

When cabinet members are removed from their increasingly diversifying student body, they can choose to be unaware of the challenges and inequitable experiences SoCs encounter on campus unless it arises in a crisis. Without accessing students, especially SoCs, on a regular basis as VPSAs do, the concerns that VPSAs share about SoCs' experiences collide with limited knowledge and awareness, thus evoking limited skills. Charles referenced the difference between his cabinet peers and his approach to advocating for SoCs. Charles also believes that greater access to students can significantly shape conversations around supporting SoCs. He simply stated, "I think I just have greater access to the students."

At times, data can be a common language for cabinet members. Regardless of their motivation behind addressing problems that arise from the data, the use of data can levy the extent of power a cabinet member can use to make change. For Elizabeth, the extent to which data are analyzed determines how data can be used to aid the efforts in prioritizing SoCs. Elizabeth recognized the limitations that arise when data is not aggregated by race. She said,

> I certainly feel like I have prioritized the student expe-

> rience portion of the question around race and ethnicity or SoCs, particularly. I have had less success pushing the conversation around academic issues for our SoCs, mostly because the lens that we've used at my institution around student success has been very data focused and the way that we're reviewing that data oftentimes excludes race and ethnicity as one of the success factors. Although, I think intellectually we all know that it is a factor but we're not framing it that way. And so, I have not been as able to create those conversations as I would like. I've tried to shape the conversation more on the student experience side of the equation, which is an area that I obviously have more control for.

Overall, as a member of the cabinet, VPSAs have direct access to the president where they can build trusting relationships that lead to increased power and agency to advocate for SoCs. In addition to their direct access to the president, they also work directly with cabinet members who do not have direct interactions with diverse student populations. To meet cabinet members where they are, VPSAs referenced that data could be used as a common language when advocating for SoCs.

A Discussion of Blurred Lines

Despite the challenging context in which they work, VPSAs advocate for SoCs and challenge their colleagues to prioritize these students' needs. VPSAs in this study demonstrated their professional values in social justice and inclusion; however, transforming social justice attitudes into action on today's college campuses is challenging (McNair et al., 2020). While we can celebrate VPSAs' efforts to support SoCs to achieve academic success, we cannot separate their attempts from interest convergence. In most cases, bold moves presumably became watered-down approaches as they straddled the line of professional setting and values. Interest convergence can be seen most in their mission statements and diversity strategic plans, justifications for race-based programs, and the extent to which they challenged their colleagues about race.

Mission Statements

While all student affairs mission statements in this study relay a commitment to centering student experiences, some of the statements explicitly stated their support of the institutional mission. The rationale for articulating the allegiance to the institution within the mission statement is not identified in this study. However, it signals how and to who the division directs its service to guide policies, practices, programs, and decision-making. Because mission statements are visible and readily accessible to the public, it is plausible that mission statements aim to maintain a notion of social desirability for community stakeholders. In the case of a historically white institution, faculty, staff, and students are predominantly white. Thus, mission statements often appease the white majority. The same goes for strategic plans, in which Iverson (2007) points out that they often utilize interest convergence that exhibits benefits for SoCs in exchange of benefits for white students or, in this case, predominately white institutions. As a result, many mission statements do not include an explicit commitment to specific groups historically excluded from the institution. For institutions that tout support for the institutional mission, the mission statements play it safe. Overall, the student affairs mission statements are bold enough to support SoCs, shy of making the white majority uncomfortable, which is an extension of interest convergence.

Rationales for Race-based Programs

While affirming practices, programs, and relationships are supported and celebrated by the participating VPSAs, rationales. McCoy and Rodricks (2015) acknowledged that institutions personify interest convergence when they accept SoCs in an effort to increase enrollment or appear as inclusive. However, the institution does not provide the resources necessary to support the students. One VPSA said, "If you want more students of color, your quality declines" when they discussed the paradoxical outcomes of recruitment efforts for

a more diverse student population. To the extent that it would not sacrifice their graduation rates and standardized test scores rather than build supports that fill in the voids left by a flawed system.

In another example, a VPSA described their program that provides support for students who are conditionally accepted. Participation in the program satisfies a condition for full acceptance to the institution and claims to fill the gap left by the under-resourced schools the conditionally accepted students attended. The VPSA explained the program's purpose as follows: "the idea is to give them some introduction to help them with [adjusting] when all of the students return." The notion that SoCs are more likely to attend under-resourced schools is factual. However, utilizing the preparatory programs to determine whether SoCs have the "willingness to succeed", as stated by one participant, or to prepare them to be in a predominately white environment places responsibility on the student he institution to prepare for a more diverse student body. Again, the student affairs program intends well but supports students who are willing to conform or who have earned what others' circumstances have historically created with minimal obstacles. Bensimon (2007) suggested attested that these perspectives suggest that some well-intended programs and practices are based on the intent of fixing students rather than fixing the system.

Conversations Among Leaders

VPSAs reiterated that the relationship with the president or chancellor was a primary reason why they felt they had the power to make a change on their campus and prioritize SoCs' success. As aforementioned, this power looked different for VPSAs from racially minoritized backgrounds versus their white counterparts. To an extent, interest convergence was used to the benefit of racially minoritized VPSAs and could be interpreted as playing the game in their favor. For example, Louise discussed how her white peers commonly perceived her support or advocacy for SoCs as a personal preference. Understanding this, Louise said, "In order to not be seen as playing favorites, what we have to do is sort of initiate other people to do these things with our support." James accepted the responsibility of addressing racially biased incidents rather than relinquishing this task to someone who may have been colorblind and race-neutral in their response. Throughout Ann's interview, she discussed how she built relationships with individuals, one-on-one, with the intent to have intimate discussions about race and how decisions impacted SoCs on campus. These tactics were perceived to be more palatable to their institutions, and they could have a positive impact on SoCs' success. Important to note is that, in the absence of the strategies used by VPSAs of Color, SoCs may not have had as positive of outcomes. This analysis suggests that interest convergence could be used favorably.

Implications

This study reveals the nuanced reality of VPSAs' experiences prioritizing SoC success on their campuses. The nuances emerge from a constant between how an institution interprets social justice and inclusion and how student affairs define the value. While VPSAs describe their experiences as "straddling the line", postsecondary success for SoCs is held in the balance. We can celebrate the progress VPSAs have helped advocate for and recognize that there is still progress needed to address our SoCs' persistent reality. Findings from this study informed three strategies VPSAs can utilize to take a strong stance in prioritizing SoCs' success.

Question Everything

If higher education was built for white and wealthy men and many programs, policies, and practices remain today, it makes sense that institutional practices can lead to unequal outcomes. There is power in asking questions about any program, policy, or practice on your campus. VPSAs

have the power to challenge the status quo among their leadership teams. Encouraging a culture of inquiry is accepted when discussing the assessment and evaluation of student affairs initiatives, but asking how SoCs will be impacted by all decisions and activity is imperative to changing the course against the tides that precede us in higher education (Witham & Bensimon, 2012). Bensimon's equity-minded framework suggests that equity-minded practice focuses on racialized structures, policies, and practices that promote inequitable outcomes (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The Center for Urban Education developed a list of questions that can inspire additional inquiries about what we assume is equitable for all students (Bensimon, 2020).

Improve Racial Literacy

As many individuals witnessed the publicized horror of Black folx murdered at the hands of law enforcement in 2020 while encouraged to remain at home as a safety precaution during the Coronavirus pandemic, a surge in purchasing anti-racist books and engaging in conversations about race became the new normal (Harris, 2020). Rush to increase knowledge regarding anti-racism and equity-minded leadership is a practice that can improve racial literacy. It reflects Harper's (2019) call to leaders to share resources about race with colleagues and designate time to discuss them. Student affairs culture embraces continuous improvement and is further supported by the vast access college and university libraries provide, professional organizations with common reading programs, and journals prioritizing book reviews. However, access and culture to expand racial literacy do not directly infer action. How VPSAs embed this practice of improving racial literacy in their work is as important as the professional development opportunities that prepare them for fundraising, supervision, and other responsibilities.

Rely on History

For many years, our college campuses have preserved historical celebrations and suppressed historical truths. History captures a dismal narrative of higher education's legacy of exclusion; however, it provides a place to start. Name the existing disparities and how they got there in mission statements, program proposals, and budgetary decisions. For example, given the data that supports the disparities across racial and ethnic minority groups, publicly naming specific groups that the division seeks to support would have a concrete rationale supported by data. It would also acknowledge the history that created the conditions that required race-centered programs. This acknowledgment would ensure that individuals whom the institution was not built for are called out by name and, thus, seen and heard by their institutional agents.

Conclusion

Overall, this study confirms that context matters. VPSAs referenced the nation's racial climate, the institution's historical context, and their student affairs culture as the primary environmental influences that mitigated how they fulfilled their position's duties. Illustrated explicitly in this manuscript is the conflict between institutional cultures that have historically centered whiteness and a student affairs culture that attempts to prioritize creating an inclusive environment that reflects the diverse experiences of their student populations. Although VPSAs, student affairs mission statements, and strategic diversity plans reference direct support for SoCs on their campuses, all efforts to support SoCs are in constant flux with the broader institutional culture. As a result, VPSAs explained that their institution's culture and context often determined their limitations and opportunities.

From a critical race perspective, relying on institutions historically centered on whiteness will inevitably slow progress toward equitable experiences for students from "marginalized" racial and ethnic backgrounds. Students of color cannot risk

having VPSAs who are unwilling to speak up in rooms where they are not. Students of color cannot risk having VPSAs who are unwilling to ask questions in rooms where they are not. Students of color cannot risk having VPSAs who are unwilling to remind colleagues of historical truth in rooms where they are not. A firm and unwavering stance on supporting SoCs is needed to improve the experiences and success for SoCs that begins with setting new cultural norms for the profession and its practices, raising race consciousness at the campus leadership level, and holding peers accountable for equity-mindedness that involves a restless commitment to moving values of equity to practice. VPSAs in this study illustrated how deeply intertwined efforts to prioritize SoC success are with systems and policies that ignore the reality of racial inequities in the American education system. While context matters, VPSAs are called to prioritize who is at risk when straddling the line.

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