

DEVELOPING HESA GRADUATE STUDENT CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN A DIVERSITY IN HIED COURSE

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Abstract

This study uses a critical consciousness framework to understand the experiences of higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate students in an elective Diversity in HIED course. We drew from narrative inquiry to analyze data from selected student coursework in online discussion board conversations and journal entries. Students demonstrated building a foundation for engagement with critical consciousness, particularly through themes of interest in the emotions that surfaced during the course, reconceptualizing “diversity,” and how to apply their learning to HESA practice. Participant learning reflected that HESA graduate programs can foster an important foundation for personal and professional development in this area. This knowledge can help faculty and supervisors support HESA graduate students’ learning and preparation for active engagement regarding critical consciousness in HESA practice.

Keywords: critical consciousness, diversity course, HESA graduate preparation

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Professional organizations of HESA advocate for the need to prepare future HESA professionals for active scholarly engagement with issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion (ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies, 2015; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2019; Shelton & Yao, 2019). However, there continues to be a mismatch between espoused values and enacted commitments to diversity and multicultural competence outcomes within many HESA graduate programs (Harris & Linder, 2018). In an effort to address this mismatch, the purpose of our study is to explore the preparation of HESA graduate students for scholarly practice related to critical consciousness, which is an intersectional and ongoing, proactive approach to engaging with power dynamics related to shifting salience of multiple identities (Linder & Cooper, 2016). The research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of HESA graduate students in an elective diversity in HIED course? As faculty who taught this study, we explored HESA graduate student preparation rooted in a theoretical foundation of critical consciousness as an avenue to prepare HESA educators for practice.

There is increasing diversity within the broader U.S. and within higher education (Harper & Quaye, 2014). As a result of this demographic trend, HESA administrators and graduate preparation programs have attempted “to better prepare their students to work with diverse populations of college students - in short, to become multiculturally competent” (Howard-Hamilton et al., 2016, p. 14). Despite the priority higher education institutions have given to multicultural initiatives, there is a need to better understand the experiences of educators responsible for developing and facilitating these efforts (Landreman et al., 2007). Previous research has shown that students’ social identities influence their learning experiences in courses that include diversity topics and how they process information related to privilege and oppression (Brunsma et al., 2016; Harris & Linder,

2018; Shelton & Yao, 2019). Given these complexities, HESA graduate preparation programs have a responsibility to develop scholar-practitioners prepared to engage critical consciousness in their HESA work. This preparation should be infused throughout HESA graduate programs, as well as in courses focused specifically on deep engagement with diversity in HIED topics (Shelton & Yao, 2019).

Literature Review

The importance of social justice in student affairs work has long been acknowledged by HESA professional organizations. The 2015 ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies explicitly recognized Social Justice and Inclusion (SJI) as a core competency of higher education professionals. The SJI competency calls for educators who can “advocate on issues of social justice, oppression, privilege, and power” and “design programs and events that are inclusive, promote social consciousness, and challenge current institutional, national, global, and sociopolitical systems of oppression” (p. 31). However, how SJI has been enacted throughout HESA curriculum continues to be incongruous with these calls from professional organizations (Harris & Linder, 2018; Shelton & Yao, 2019). According to Crandall et al. (2022) while social justice is an espoused value of the field, “little is known about how graduate programs prepare early-career professionals ... to be effective in this work” (p. 134). In this literature review, we highlight the need for facilitating students’ critical consciousness in HESA curriculum and how social identity influences these student experiences.

Social Justice and Inclusion in HESA Curriculum

For future HESA educators, graduate coursework provides “a time for individuals to learn the norms of the profession” (Lombardi & Mather, 2016, p. 86). Though SJI is an adopted value of the field, not all HESA graduate preparation pro-

grams have a required diversity course where such topics are discussed (Flowers, 2003). Few studies have explicitly examined how SJI is incorporated into HESA curriculum. And, as Crandall et al. (2022) argued, most of the published research focused on “multicultural competence or diversity, which do not fully capture ACPA/NASPA’s (2015) framing of SJI” (p. 134). Recent literature has examined how specific tenets of SJI have been built into HESA curriculum. For example, Shelton and Yao (2019) explored how HESA graduate programs prepared future HESA educators to work with international students, which is articulated as a part of the SJI competency by ACPA/NASPA (2015). The authors found that many HESA graduate programs were lacking in their efforts to prepare students to work with international students’ post-graduation. This was partially due to a lack of formalized coursework about international student populations, with such topics instead being explored through general conversations about social justice and students’ own interests (Shelton & Yao, 2019). This illustrated how HESA graduate preparation programs are missing the mark in preparing graduates to be more critically conscious in their practice.

Researchers have highlighted how HESA educators are often underprepared to put their SJI-focused learning into practice, as they are not ready for the “complexities they encountered working with students” (Boss et al., 2018, p. 378). While students have identified student development theory courses as one way they interacted with social justice and diversity-related topics, they reported that most of their learning has come via practical experiences, such as through their assistantships (Talbot, 1996). Harrison (2010) similarly found that most HESA educators reported primarily learning to engage in SJI work outside of their graduate preparation programs. Senior student affairs officers have espoused that SJI is a necessary element for early career professionals and HESA graduate preparation (Crandall et al., 2022). We argue that preparing HESA professionals through

intentional development of critical consciousness is a necessary part of HESA graduate preparation.

Social Identities in the Classroom

Though previous studies (e.g., Harris & Linder, 2018) highlighted the disconnect between espoused values of SJI and enacted competencies in HESA curricula, it is important to note how students’ social identities shape their experiences in the classroom. Previous research has shown that students’ social identities influence their learning experiences, including emotional responses, in courses that include diversity topics and how they process information related to privilege and oppression (Brunnsma et al., 2016; Harris & Linder, 2018; Shelton & Yao, 2019). Bondi (2012) noted how whiteness is engrained into U.S. higher education, which in turn centers white students, and “[protects] whiteness through content and curriculum” (p. 405). In Bondi’s (2012) study, white students not only expected whiteness to be centered, but also felt threatened, and sought to protect their whiteness, when whiteness was not centered in the classroom. Furthermore, students in this study, “[maintained] segregation in the classroom and social situations” (Bondi, 2012, p. 404). This practice of segregation is echoed by other researchers examining the experiences of Students of Color.

Gasman et al. (2008) recognized this “racial schism” (p. 134) between Students of Color and white students, which shaped the curricular and social experiences of Students of Color. In fact, when examining the experiences of Students of Color in HESA preparation programs, Harris and Linder (2018) not only recognized these feelings of isolation in Students of Color, but also found that Students of Color often reported having to educate their white peers, due to the “lack of depth concerning social justice, cultural competence, and/or diversity in their programs” (p. 149). Students of Color also reported having their experiences invalidated by both their peers in the classroom and their faculty members (Harris & Linder, 2018). These differentiated experiences of students due

to their social identities serve as a reminder of the necessity of helping HESA graduate students develop cultural competence. As Harris and Linder (2018) urged, “HESA faculty must stop relying on and positioning Students of Color as native informants in the classroom” (p.155). Doing such could enrich the HESA curricula and alleviate the additional burdens placed upon the shoulders of Students of Color. Given these realities, we envision that HESA graduate preparation programs have the potential and responsibility to develop engaged scholar-practitioners regarding critical consciousness in their HESA work. Furthermore, we suggest that this preparation should be infused throughout HESA graduate programs, as well as in courses focused specifically on deep engagement with diversity in HIED topics.

Critical Consciousness Framework

One of our Diversity in HIED course goals was preparing HESA educators to critically engage in understanding and disrupting power, privilege, and oppression throughout their careers. In seeking to understand student experiences with this goal, the current study was guided by Linder and Cooper’s (2016) concept of critical consciousness.

Social Justice Frameworks and Race Conscious Approaches

A foundational cultural competency model in HESA was Howard-Hamilton et al.’s (1998) set of multicultural attributes for students that covered awareness, understanding, and appreciation/valuing through knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Building upon this model, Pope et al. (2004) created a key work on multicultural competence to center awareness, knowledge, and skills, which those authors later (2014) expanded to name “incorporating issues of social class, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and others into the initial conversation which primarily focused on race” (p, 12). HESA scholarship since then has noted the need for intersectionality to examine

“race, sex, class, national origins, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58), which is important as intersectionality affects all college students (Yao et al., 2018).

Further guiding work is the ACPA/NAS-PA (2015) professional competencies document which “set out the scope and content of professional competencies required of student affairs educators in order for them to succeed within the current higher educational environment as well as projected future environments” (p. 7). Of relevance to the current study is the social justice and inclusion (SJI) competency which reflects an evolution of “diversity and social justice” from awareness to an active orientation. SJI is “...both a process and a goal which includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups while seeking to address and acknowledge issues of oppression, privilege, and power” (2015, p. 14). Connecting to earlier frameworks that primarily centered race (Pope et al., 2014), ACPA has called for the need to center race in our work. The ACPA Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization (Quaye et al., 2019) is focused on “reducing the oppression of communities of color at the intersections of their identities, knowing that all oppressions are linked and that the work is ongoing” (para 1), and that racial justice “is at our core; it underlies the work we each must do every day, in every way we can” (para 1) as HESA educators.

Evolution of Multicultural Competence and Critical Consciousness

In early conceptualizations, a central component of critical consciousness was to address multi-systemic oppression (Freire, 1970), and later Watts et al. (1999) operationalized critical consciousness with a five-stage model of sociopolitical development. Landreman et al. (2007) found that multicultural and intercultural competence studies were limited, as “competence” was not clearly

defined and did not explicitly address the need for intergroup relationships situated within various social locations regarding power. The evolution of multicultural and intercultural competence, to critical consciousness centers developing meaningful relationships and a lifelong process of intentional reflection and meaning making on critical incidents (Landreman et al., 2007). In contrast to multicultural or intercultural competence, critical consciousness moves beyond an end goal and “advances multicultural competence by requiring educators to stay critically engaged, understanding the complex ways in which power, context, and constantly shifting identities influence ways students experience campus environments” (Linder & Cooper, 2016, p. 381). This engagement requires “educators to understand themselves, their experiences, and ways to engage in action related to social change rather than just understanding those who are different from themselves, critical consciousness pushes on educators to move beyond competence to continued engagement” to “name and challenge power dynamics in campus policies, practices, and individual interactions [to] contribute to more inclusive campuses for students from all backgrounds” (p. 381). Strategies for ongoing action are rooted in intersectionality and components of social justice education.

Critical consciousness has been used as a framework in studies ranging from examining the importance of educators as empowerment agents who disrupt oppression (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), to encouraging Latinx/a/o college student social activism related to empowered academic identities (López, 2023), and to finding both positive and negative campus racial incidents facilitated critical consciousness among Black immigration students (Mwangi et al., 2019). Of relevance to the current study is scholarship on outcomes of college diversity courses (Eisshofer, 2022), as well as critical frameworks examining experiences in HESA graduate preparation programs (Harris & Linder, 2019; Linder, 2019). Eisshofer (2022) concluded the need for “research examining stu-

dent work produced in required diversity courses and course design for strategies is largely absent from the field of study” (online first, para 1). HESA scholarship has specifically addressed power-conscious and critical approaches for educators supporting student activists (Linder, 2019) and in facilitating HESA graduate student learning (Harris & Linder, 2019). The current study addresses calls from these authors (Eisshofer, 2022; Harris & Linder 2019) by using student coursework as data to examine HESA graduate student learning regarding critical consciousness.

Critical Consciousness in the Current Study

Given these earlier critiques of multicultural competence as insufficient, we chose to use a critical consciousness framework to emphasize a holistic approach including individuals’ salient identities and long-term engagement in shifting contexts situated with power, privilege, and oppression. Aforementioned scholarship informed the second author in creation of the Diversity in HIED course by providing considerations for learning outcomes, readings, assignments, and paradigms for facilitating the course. This scholarship led her to intentionally create learning opportunities that center naming and exploring salient social identities within matrixes of power, privilege, and oppression in society and in HESA while encouraging students to use this knowledge to inform practice. This framework later guided us to be attentive to themes and resultant implications related to active engagement with critical examination of power and identities in students’ learning as it related to building their HESA practice.

Methods

Below we explain drawing from narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 2005) to analyze data collected from HIED students who took an elective Diversity in HIED course.

About the Course

The second author developed a three-credit 16-week Diversity in HIED elective course that she first taught in spring 2015 at “Southern University.” The course has been offered once per academic year since then, most recently by the first author who taught the course in spring 2019 when data were collected for the current study. The third author, most recently a full-time HESA professional, took the Diversity in HIED course in Spring 2018. During the course, students read reflection pieces of scholars who discuss their personal identities in relation to power structures (e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa) as they reflected on their own identities. Students learned about theories and frameworks for creating more socially just and inclusive HIED institutions.

Participants

We used purposeful sampling, a strategic approach to seek out the best cases to produce information-rich data that can address the research purpose and questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, in our study purposeful sampling based on those enrolled in the course because they were all sharing the classroom content and learning experience. The participant selection criteria included: a completed a face-to-face, three-credit elective Diversity in HIED course in spring 2019 in Southern University’s HIED graduate program. To recruit participants in the course, on the first day of class, the instructor (first author) explained to students in the Diversity in HIED course about the study and passed out consent forms. Regardless of their choice to participate in the study, they had to submit a signed form. Students then passed an envelope around to collect all the forms prior to sealing it and returning it to the instructor. The instructor did not open the envelope until after grades were posted. In lieu of a traditional demographic form, we added a layer of participant anonymity by not collecting a traditional demographic form since students were enrolled in our course during data collection. Instead, in alignment with

our study aims, during data analysis we created a list of participant self-identified salient identities (Table 1) based on the contents of the nine participant’s assignments submitted as data. The range of student-identified social identities reflects a component of the framework in that “...intersectional frameworks...illustrate how systems of heterosexism, cissexism, racism, and other forms of oppression are embedded in higher education institutions” (Lange et al., 2019, p. 513). Participant self-identified salient identities included race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, religion, socio-economic status, first-generation college student, single-parent household, and disability. Notably, given the framework’s specific naming of racial battle fatigue, race, ethnicity, and/or nationality was accounted for in all the participant self-selected salient identities except for one student.

Data Collection

While teaching the course, the first author collected data throughout the 2019 spring semester via coursework that served as data for this study, including in-class and homework assignments, Blackboard discussion board conversations, and journal entries. Existing scholarship (Eisshofer, 2022) guided this decision given the call for student coursework as data in diversity courses. Furthermore, in alignment with an ethnographic design, student coursework allowed us to center students’ narratives as the assignments called for them to discuss past experiences and their more recent learning process with social justice and inclusion topics. The course assignments were spread throughout the semester and represented a variety of data sources. These assignments counted for over 90 pieces of data across the nine participants. We collected data from over 25 discussion board posts on topics including access and participation in higher education, minority serving institutions, and social movements and higher education. We also collected data from over 50 journal entries throughout the semester on topics focused on

weekly readings addressing power, privilege, and oppression. Additionally, we collected nine “invisible knapsack” essays for data where students created their own privilege and oppression list based on one of their self-selected salient social identities. Lastly, we collected data from nine final papers on student-selected topics that ranged from neo-racism and international students to gender inclusive housing, disability support, rural students, Black men’s college success, socioeconomic status in admissions, and women in Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM).

Data Analysis

The selected elements of narrative inquiry such as thematic analysis (Riessman, 2005) helped us focus on centering multiple narratives which situated the topic in the sociopolitical climate while validating participants’ agency in their lived experiences as sources of important knowledge (Clandinin, 2013). Existing literature and critical consciousness framework also guided our data analysis. Our study draws from narrative research which involves studying the lives of individuals through participants telling stories about their lives (Battacharya, 2017). In the current study, we used data from coursework as an avenue for students to tell stories about their lives related to social identities and diversity-related topics. We analyzed data using the constant comparative method, an analysis technique in which data must be constantly compared to each other and for the researcher to combine and refine categories to produce interpretations of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We completed three levels of coding: 1) open coding, 2) codes were combined into categories, and 3) categories were combined into themes. A qualitative narrative emerged from the data analysis. This narrative included a thick and rich description of students’ experiences in the course and ability to apply content learned to practice.

The critical consciousness framework links to our critical paradigm informing the study through-

out, as our worldview is influenced by our socialization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We seek to bring about a more just society, which includes an interrogation of power dynamics in research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, to address issues of dependability, consistency, and external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) we are implementing the following procedures: transcript checking, maintaining consistent coding, and peer checking; using rich, thick description, clarifying the bias we brought to the study, and presenting information that falls outside of any major themes (Merriam, 2002). The co-authors also maintained an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) used in a log of personal notes. Using Dedoose software allowed each of us to individually code data before we compared coding as a group in weekly research team meetings. These meetings included reviewing and clarifying any discrepant coding. We continued refining codes and theme creation until we reached consensus, which allowed for each research team member to bring our own lenses and perceptions to the experience engaging with the data.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As the co-authors are primary instruments of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we were attentive to the multiple identities that have shaped our privileges and oppression. The first author noted the importance of her identities as Latina, cisgender woman who is a first-generation college student. The second author’s salient identities were being a White, queer woman who is a first-generation college student. The third author’s salient identities included being a White, gay, cisgender man who is a first-generation college student. We are all early career scholars, which impacted the course realities due to the potential repercussions of student push-back or negative evaluations, especially for women and Faculty of Color (Gonzalez & Leibman, 2022). Overall, race was an especially salient identity for the co-authors as we noted students with the same racial identity as the faculty member may

lead to those students being more receptive to talking openly about race. As we all held various outsider/insider social identity statuses, coupled with power dynamics of leading the course, these realities likely shaped the way students viewed the faculty member teaching the course during data collection, thus impacting how information was disclosed. Having ongoing relationships with the students in class via other courses and academic advising assisted in developing rapport. Genuine engagement on these realities with the research team and participants further addressed our paradigmatic stance that false objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) attempts to erase the realities of one's identities and the resultant power and privilege dynamics that influence the research process.

Limitations

Students who agreed to participate in the study at the beginning of the semester may have filtered their coursework content over the course of the semester for the sake of social desirability, knowing that their work would be subject to an additional layer of scrutiny post-semester. Since participants had to opt into the study, there is likely valuable data not included from other students' assignments who did not elect to participate.

Findings

Student assignments had open prompts that allowed them to highlight concepts that stood out as significant to them within the broader materials. Themes emerged around student interest in the emotions that surfaced during the course, re-conceptualizing "diversity," and how to apply their learning to HESA practice.

Emotions

Students explicitly noted experiencing a range of emotions regarding the course from anxiety and fear to being disgruntled, surprised, angry, frustrated, shameful, overwhelmed, shocked, guilty, and empowered. Anne, Harvie, and Julie all wrote

about feeling anxiety at the start of the semester because they were unsure how the course would be taught, and they had a fear of using the "wrong language" in class. Harvie noted right away, "I'll admit, the readings for the first week of class were tough because they involved a lot of self-reflection on white privilege...Being a white woman, I never took the time to consider what that meant to me." Sam was the only participant who noted feeling "disgruntled" because he felt the main textbook examples were "over dramatized and degrading" to him as a white male, and "... As the only white male in the class I feel that anything I say is probably not taken as serious [sic] as others might see it."

In contrast to dismissing the materials, most participants with majoritized social identities leaned into the learning while experiencing emotions like surprise, anger, frustration, and shame. Julia and April noted being surprised and angry at the realities they learned about in class such as the history of racism in the U.S., including the forced sterilization of Black women and the prison pipeline for African-American men. Alexa noted strong emotions as she considered, "I was torn between frustration and shame...it's still a struggle because...I don't always know what to do. As frustratingly hopeless as it feels to have privilege issues resting in the hands of the dominant group, I have to believe that the world is getting better." Participant emotions extended to considering what their course learning means for life outside of the classroom. Anne noted, "Even though I am not White, after I started taking this course, I go through [sic] a lot of thoughts and emotions. At some point, I feel so overwhelmed with shock and guilt... but I also want to make positive changes." Similarly, April noted feeling helpless and frustrated regarding how to make a positive impact when issues are so deeply rooted in society. Vision was one of the few participants who noted feeling empowered, as "I do feel more empowered in my daily life activities as a graduate student and paraprofessional in the field. I am way more inquisitive. I find myself

asking more of the “right” questions, pondering exactly how I can improve the current higher education environment.” Students had the opportunity to share and reflect on this range of emotions, which often led to considerations for practice regarding reconceptualizing “diversity” and application to their HESA work.

Reconceptualizing “Diversity”

While reflecting, students often grappled with how to conceptualize diversity within higher education contexts. Students’ experiences led them to believe that diversity is often treated as a commodity, something to benefit the university as an institution rather than the students, faculty, and staff who studied and worked there. For example, Sam wrote, “I do not feel that universities necessarily move toward this model [of diversity] to benefit students, but to rather help fill their pockets.” Sam referred to this as universities paying “lip service” to diversity without offering tangible commitment and change. Alexa agreed, writing, “It’s really easy to just ‘pay lip-service’ and say that a university is committed to diversity without making any genuine change.” Furthermore, Alexa argued that universities would continue in this model of commodified diversity until they are “forced to contemplate diversity at the behest of the lawsuit.”

While students recognized that diversity was often treated as a commodity to benefit the university, they also called into question who these programs were created for and by. Students felt that diversity initiatives were often treated as a “marketing campaign” and, as Alexa wrote, something created by “a bunch of straight white people... to help other straight white people feel better about diversity.” Students consistently felt that current conceptions of diversity within higher education contexts was rooted at the surface level, with little commitment or consistent action.

In considering how to reconceptualize diversity, students felt that higher education needed to move away from a reactive approach to diversity to a proactive approach. Sam wrote that when it

comes to diversity, higher education professionals “are always trying to solve a problem that has already occurred instead of guiding the way to avoid potential future problems in the areas of inequality” on campus. Jermaine also pushed for a more proactive approach to diversity. To be proactive, Jermaine felt that it was important to “challenge Whiteness” on campus and to “define what institutional diversity is and what it means to our campuses.” Jermaine believed that by defining institutional diversity, higher education leaders could begin to set goals and initiatives to attain this aspirational definition, with the proper funding, staffing, and resources. Students consistently recognized how higher education views diversity as a commodity, a marketing ploy, and something to pay lip service to without actionable commitment. To move past this, students believed that diversity should be treated proactively, rather than reactively. Only then, can higher education begin to craft equitable environments for all.

Application to HESA Practice

Students were eager to apply their learning from the course to their HESA practice, particularly as it related to them taking responsibility for creating positive change. Harvie journaled about her responsibility in learning about her supervisees, co-workers and students. She found that content from class highlighted how important identities are in building meaningful relationships. Harvie asked, “Do I really take the time to get to know them and their identity?” He wondered, “Especially for my students who do not know their identities or can identify with different backgrounds...How can I support them and help them succeed and help them figure out their own identities?” Similarly, Sam discussed how class readings helped him realize how multicultural education can lead to institutional excellence. More specifically he discussed his work unit and shared, “... currently, our programming isn’t that diverse in my opinion, but I see ways in which multicultural education could easily be added without many

even acknowledging its presence...to foster more 'intergroup agency'...to empower students, faculty, and staff for excellence." For Harvie and Sam, the class readings promoted reflection about their work environments and their practices, allowing them to take ownership in finding ways to improve them.

Similarly for some participants the course content made systemic oppression more visible in their quotidian life and interactions. Yet, their position and professional rank within the institution influence how much agency they felt to speak up at work. For example, Anne noted, that although she had witnessed conversations that were discriminatory against the LGBTQ+ community she noted that "...when it comes to actually make actions [sic], I worry about my position as a graduate assistant and how I should address people about issues related to diversity." This concern demonstrates the importance of including content within Diversity in HIED courses that speak on the various ways in which one can exercise agency on issues of diversity within higher education environments.

Discussion

Findings from this study can inform HESA graduate preparation programs which are lacking in preparing graduates to be more critically conscious in their professional practice (Harris & Linder, 2018; Shelton & Yao, 2019). Participant learning reflected that HESA graduate programs can set a foundation for critical consciousness which requires sustained, active engagement over time, which students demonstrated beginning to build during the course.

Experiencing Emotions

Participants in our study experienced a wide range of emotions while participating in the diversity course. Often, these emotions were directly tied to the students' salient identities, which echoed previous literature that showed how stu-

dents' social identities impacted their learning experiences and processing of topics related to diversity, privilege, and oppression (Brunsma et al., 2016; Harris & Linder, 2018). Student emphasis on their emotions reflects the importance of personal reflection regarding salient social identities, particularly regarding power dynamics, which are key aspects of developing critical consciousness (Harris & Linder, 2018). Several students noted this course was the first time they had explored their various social identities in-depth, especially regarding critically examining their majoritized identities. Throughout the course of the semester, student writing increasingly demonstrated exploring a critical consciousness to examine what their course learning means for life outside of the classroom, both in and out of higher education contexts. Exploring their emotions that arose as a part of this process led most students to experience "challenging" emotions such as fear, anger, and frustration regarding their majoritized identities, which we suggest can be activated by those in privileged social identities as catalysts for positive change. Notably, one participant reflected on feeling empowered, which meant asking questions about HESA practices rooted in a critical lens to disrupt power dynamics and better serve more students.

Of note was the limited attention participants gave toward reflecting upon race prior to their time in the diversity course. Participants were asked to identify salient identities and reflect upon how "those identities shift depending on the context in which they find themselves" (Linder & Cooper, 2016, p. 382). Some white participants noted feelings of ignorance and being dismissed due to their racial identities, while Students of Color often repeated how they saw the need to "challenge Whiteness" in higher education. Participants were tasked with reading and reflecting on power related to race and "the role of power in campus environments, cultures, and policies" (Linder & Cooper, 201, p. 382), but for some students, this was their first time considering race and power in

higher education contexts. Though these students were challenged to be increasingly critical of their own salient identities and positioning on campus, this points toward a need for intentionally centering racial consciousness as a part of a larger critical consciousness curriculum. Ultimately, students reflected developing a critical consciousness by envisioning how they would be attentive to emotions regarding social identities and power, and active in this learning over time to use a critical consciousness in practice.

Reconceptualizing “Diversity”

Participants in our study often grappled with how to conceptualize diversity within higher education contexts. They felt that higher education often treats diversity as a commodity or a metric rather than as something that can benefit all those on campus. Participants’ thoughts were reflective of work by Ahmed (2012) who argued that universities often treat “diversity” with purposeful ambiguity, as a marketing strategy, and as a “containment strategy” (p. 53). Student critiques of this reality demonstrated employing critical consciousness as they addressed the need for advancing the concept of “diversity” to become an engaged process over time that requires commitment to change. Critical consciousness was also evident as students discovered the imperative to problematize structures and systems such as policies and institutions that impact HESA practice. Students began questioning the intent and outcomes of “diversity programming” in their work on campus, as they called for moving beyond surface level diversity commitment to ongoing, consistent proactive efforts. Overwhelmingly, our participants believed that higher education needed to move away from a reactive approach to diversity to a proactive approach, which would meet the call outlined in the ACPA/NASPA (2015) SJI competency. Student emphasis on conceptualizing diversity through a critical lens rooted in actionable commitment reflected a growing critical consciousness for their practice.

Applications to HESA Practice

Participants demonstrated eagerness in wanting to apply their learning from the course to their HESA practice, particularly as it related to them taking responsibility for creating positive change, which is reflective of the SJI competency’s call for HESA professionals to “advocate on issues of social justice, oppression, privilege, and power” (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 31). Key components of critical consciousness include ongoing reflection of power dynamics, critical reflection on who is included and excluded in campus spaces, and staying abreast of current issues (Linder & Cooper, 2016). Participants demonstrated these elements throughout the semester as their work highlighted how course content made systemic oppression more visible in their life and interactions both in and out of higher education contexts, resulting in them taking ownership in finding ways to improve conditions personally and professionally. Students began to question who was excluded in campus spaces, considered intersectionality, and understanding the importance of being in community with others committed to critically conscious approaches. Overall, these elements of critical consciousness were apparent in student work over the course of just one semester, which is a relatively short time compared to the long-term engagement required of critical consciousness work. This is a hopeful study contribution, as it indicates that HESA graduate preparation programs hold the potential for successfully introducing and building critical consciousness in HESA educators who can implement this approach over time as lifelong learners.

Implications

In this study, we move beyond building multicultural competence as an end goal to a process of critical consciousness that engages HESA graduate students with continued disruption of power dynamics. Study findings reflecting Linder and Cooper’s (2016) critical consciousness framework

can inform updates to HESA graduate preparation ranging from curricular updates to supervisory efforts in preparing HESA students to engage in critical consciousness in practice. Furthermore, we believe these study implications are relevant to various functional areas and institutional types, as diversity-related learning and efforts should not be limited to “diversity-focused” classes, offices, or spaces alone. In reflecting key components of the critical consciousness framework, each of the following implications centers on ongoing process of engaging with power dynamics and intersectionality so students can explore their multiple identities in relation to power and oppression. Implications also reflect critical consciousness by emphasizing ongoing personal work through content mastery, critical analysis, social change, personal reflection, and awareness of group dynamics. Given our own experiences, study focus, and intended audience, these implications center suggestions for HESA faculty, while also acknowledging this knowledge may help HESA graduate student supervisors foster students’ critical consciousness in assistantships and internships.

As addressed by Linder and Cooper (2016) part of developing critical consciousness is navigating emotional exhaust through addressing racial battle fatigue, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Our participant stories highlighted the reality of such stark emotions that surface during this learning process, although they noted this course was the first time, they had explored their various social identities in-depth, especially regarding critically examining their majoritized identities. By naming this directly in class, faculty can normalize the emotions that arise from engaging deeply in this learning process. Faculty should also encourage the development of critical racial consciousness in this process as a way to navigate these emotions. Students may not always be given room to express their emotions in courses, nor have the tools to engage with those emotions, that discuss issues of power, privilege, and oppression. As such, faculty in graduate preparation programs

should build spaces that foster and encourage critical reflection and meaningful conversation regarding social identities and power dynamics. We suggest various avenues to name and work with emotions such as offering multiple ways to connect with materials, ranging from private individual reflections specifically asking students to identify their emotional processing of topics, to developing a classroom community where meaningful conversations can be explored openly together in a climate of challenge and support. Creating this classroom community occurs early, and we recommend taking the space for community building starting with low-stakes activities and intentional icebreakers to set the stage for more complex conversations.

Study findings highlighted the importance of reconceptualizing “diversity” which students demonstrated as they questioned previously taken-for-granted efforts such as examining the intent and outcomes of “diversity programming” in their work on campus. Furthermore, students in our study were enthusiastic about applying course learning, beyond surface level diversity commitments, to their HESA practice. To encourage this, HESA faculty can partner with student supervisors in assistantships, internships, and full-time campus work to empower students to take responsibility for positive change. Supervisors and faculty can carve out time to work with students to examine campus programming, policies, and procedures with a critical consciousness framework. Faculty can create lesson plans and assignments around critically examining power dynamics in campus “diversity efforts” and engage students with real world examples they can use to reimagine a more critically conscious practice. Supervisors can also create space for students to critically examine programming and other “diversity efforts” in practice and allow students to process their thoughts and provide suggestions on disrupting power dynamics to better serve minoritized students in their campus work. Finally, HESA faculty and supervisors can create intentional space for graduate students to

openly reflect on power dynamics and make systemic oppression visible through intentional conversations and professional development opportunities. Overall, providing practical opportunities for students to practice viewing and improving, campus practices and policies with critical consciousness will help them build a foundation for engaging in this practice over time.

Students were enthusiastic about applying course learning to their HESA practice. HESA faculty and student supervisors can harness this eagerness to engage in critical consciousness by empowering students to take responsibility for creating positive change. This suggestion is rooted in our belief that HESA educators can validate the capacity of graduate students to serve as change agents, including encouraging their ideas and supporting them in successes and failures as they build this foundation. HESA faculty and supervisors can also create intentional space for graduate students to openly reflect on power dynamics and make systemic oppression visible through intentional conversations and professional development opportunities. Actively using current events case studies as conversation starters in class and supervisory spaces can also help graduate students practice using a critical consciousness to consider their developing practice.

Conclusion

Students in our Diversity in HIED course demonstrated building a foundation of critical consciousness. Implications highlight that faculty and supervisors can support HESA graduate students' learning and preparation for active engagement regarding critical consciousness through assisting students to be more attentive to emotions regarding social identities and power, fostering an examination of diversity in higher education through a critical lens, and implementing meaningful applications of classroom learning to professional HESA practice.

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Table 1. Participant Self-Identified Salient Identities

Name	Salient Identities
Alexa	White, straight, woman, female
Anne	Japanese (raised in Japan), woman, international student (labels not used in Japan but in the US)
April	Heterosexual, cisgender woman, agnostic
Harvie	Privileged SES, White, woman, heterosexual
Jermaine	Black, man, single-parent household, first-generation college student, lower-middle class
Julia	Asian, woman, international student
Mika	Christian, White, woman, heterosexual
Sam	First-generation college student, low-SES upbringing, white, male, heterosexual
Vision	Black, woman, invisible disability (chronic migraines)

Note. We added a layer of participant anonymity by not collecting a demographic form since students were enrolled in our course during data collection. Instead, during data analysis we created a list of participant self-identified salient identities based on the contents of participant's assignments used as data.