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## Racial Conflict in a Higher Education Policy Vacuum

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**Abstract:** This study explored how 14 higher education and student affairs (HESA) professionals navigated institutional policy vacuums to address interpersonal racial conflict between students. Grounded in perspectives of policy vacuums, findings revealed that HESA professionals learned about racial conflict by referring to their own personal, professional, and academic training. Additionally, they employed strategies that were often self-generated and informal to address racial conflict. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, specifically highlighting that relying on HESA professionals' dispositions is an insufficient way to address racial conflict and that more institutional support is necessary to train racially responsive HESA professionals.

**Keywords:** higher education; policy vacuums; racial conflict

### Conflicto racial en un vacío de políticas de educación superior

**Resumen:** Este estudio exploró cómo 14 profesionales de educación superior y asuntos estudiantiles (HESA) navegaron vacíos de políticas institucionales para abordar el conflicto racial interpersonal entre estudiantes. Basados en perspectivas de vacíos políticos, los hallazgos revelaron que los profesionales de HESA aprendieron sobre el conflicto racial refiriéndose a su propia formación personal, profesional y académica. Además, emplearon estrategias que a menudo eran autogeneradas e informales para abordar el conflicto racial. El artículo concluye con una discusión de los hallazgos, destacando específicamente que confiar en las disposiciones

de los profesionales de HESA es una forma insuficiente de abordar el conflicto racial y que se necesita más apoyo institucional para capacitar a profesionales de HESA con sensibilidad racial.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior; vacíos políticos; conflicto racial

### **Conflito racial num vácuo político de ensino superior**

**Resumo:** Este estudo explorou como 14 profissionais do ensino superior e assuntos estudantis (HESA) navegaram nos vazios políticos institucionais para lidar com o conflito racial interpessoal entre estudantes. Com base em perspectivas de vazios políticos, as conclusões revelaram que os profissionais da HESA aprenderam sobre o conflito racial referindo-se à sua própria formação pessoal, profissional e acadêmica. Além disso, empregaram estratégias muitas vezes autogeradas e informais para resolver conflitos raciais. O artigo conclui com uma discussão das conclusões, destacando especificamente que confiar nas disposições dos profissionais de HESA é uma forma insuficiente de abordar o conflito racial e que é necessário mais apoio institucional para formar profissionais de HESA racialmente receptivos.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior; vácuos políticos; conflito racial

## **Racial Conflict in a Higher Education Policy Vacuum**

Racial conflict continues to be one of the most pervasive and pressing issues concerning the work of higher education and student affairs (HESA) professionals. Despite persistent reports of incidents with overt and subtle forms of racism on college campuses (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Mwangi et al., 2018; Serrano, 2020), there is no systemic approach for HESA professionals to address interpersonal forms of racial conflict between students (Davis & Harris, 2015). Further, while HESA professionals could rely on conduct codes and state policies to address racially motivated hate crimes, incidents such as microaggressions, hate speech, and other interpersonal forms of racial conflict are legally much harder for HESA professionals to address (Garces et al., 2021). Working within a postsecondary environment where addressing issues related to race is becoming increasingly more difficult, HESA professionals are still charged to address race-related conflicts with little to no institutional guidance.

Environments that lack guidance or pressure to address pertinent issues or processes have been described as policy vacuums (Moor, 2005). Policy vacuums provide an analytical tool to explore the institutional environment in which HESA professionals work. Policy vacuum perspectives provide a useful way to study racial conflict for three reasons: (a) they provide descriptive context for the lack of systemic responses to racial conflict; (b) they review existing strategies, if any, to address racial conflict; and (c) they anticipate and explore benefits and consequences of new practices that can ameliorate the effects of nonviolent forms of racial conflict.

HESA professionals are postsecondary administrators dedicated to supporting the academic, social, and organizational lives of postsecondary students. Student affairs professionals most often work directly with students, while higher education administrators may not always be student-facing and work in spaces such as human resources or faculty development, to name a few areas. Yet all HESA professionals are bound by the mission and vision of their postsecondary organizations that have increasingly been dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In particular, HESA professionals play an integral role in creating inclusive postsecondary environments (Pérez et al., 2017) and addressing related conflicts (Vega, 2021). Similar to Students of Color, HESA professionals who identify as People of Color encounter racially hostile work environments (Briscoe, 2022; Garcia, 2016). Yet, even HESA professionals who identify as People of Color fall into the traps of color evasiveness in their work, in some cases diminishing the experiences of Students of

Color with racism (Vega, 2022) As such, investigating the environment in which HESA professionals address racial conflict remains critically important. HESA professionals address racial conflict with little to no guidance (Kim et al., 2012) and no professional training standards (Jones, 2019). Those who acknowledge the existence of racial conflict incidents feel powerless to address them (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). To investigate how HESA professionals experience addressing racial conflict further, I focused on the following questions:

1. How do HESA professionals navigate racial conflict policy vacuums or environments that do not provide guidance on racial conflict?
2. What training, knowledge, or skills do professionals employ when handling incidents of racial conflict?

## **Addressing Racial Conflict**

Higher education institutions have always experienced racial conflict on their campuses (Chun & Feagin, 2020). Racial conflict is the rational product of a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2006) and racialized organizations (Ray, 2019). Characterized by individual or collective struggle, either disjointed or highly organized, racial conflict can lead to change or maintain the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Examples of individual and collective struggle include microaggressions or hate speech, organizational disagreements about how racial conflict is addressed, and large-scale protests. In the wake of racial conflict, interests of dominant and minoritized individuals or groups are revealed if studied carefully (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). One way to understand the interests of dominant groups or individuals is to explore how they address particular forms of racial conflict.

Historically, postsecondary leaders have felt pressure to address incidents of racial conflict to end or appease student protests (Kendi, 2012). Notably, the Black Campus Movement of the 1960s and Black Lives Matter movements since 2015 have shifted the racial constitution of postsecondary campuses. From the Black Campus Movement, student protests have addressed issues of increasing faculty of color, focusing on admissions for Students of Color, diversifying curricula, and developing diversity training (Kendi, 2012). The Black Lives Matter movement has increased attention to specific ways postsecondary institutions have embedded Anti-Blackness in their practices and policies, thereby affecting enrollment and retention (Dancy et al., 2018). As a result of these movements, HESA professionals have engaged in various ways to address racial inequities on their campuses such as increasing compositional diversity (Chang, 2002; Garces & Jayakumar, 2014; Milem et al., 2005; Stotzer & Hosellman, 2012); hiring diversity professionals (Griffin et al., 2019); implementing diversity training (Kruse et al., 2018; Petrov & Garcia, 2021); and forming bias incident response teams (BIRT) (Garces et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2018). Among these practices, BIRT can provide some guidance to managing various forms of racial conflict. Further, research has demonstrated that BIRT administrators feel both accountable to students while needing to protect the institution (Miller et al., 2018). Unfortunately, there have been movements to delegitimize racial diversity trainings (Thompson & Hollingsworth, 2022), and BIRT has also been the center of lawsuits that purport to protect freedom of speech but create voids and uncertainty in policy and practice (Garces et al., 2022).

University responses to racial conflict reflect discord in postsecondary institutions that require more analyses. One reason for these analyses includes learning from HESA professionals who manage difficult and pervasive conflicts in their work. The dash in between Harper and Hurtado's (2017) theory of consciousness-powerlessness suggests that vital information is missing about how HESA professionals can experience consciousness related to racial conflict yet not enact agency to be empowered to act. Powerlessness can manifest as inaction; inaction to resolve conflict

can result in students' mistrust to report incidents and for administrators to consider these incidents as isolated (Bonilla Silva & Peoples, 2022; Pezza & Bellotti, 1995). Utilizing policy vacuums as a lens for this analysis can shed light on reasons for inaction as well as where the locus of power lies for HESA professionals who take action to address racial conflict. Finally, analyses that utilize policy vacuum perspectives can provide insight into how HESA professionals and campuses more broadly can go from consciousness to *responsiveness* when encountering racial conflict.

HESA professionals play an important role in executing diversity initiatives (Smith, 2020). Yet, lack of enforcement, political resistance, and minimal resources for diversity training on college campuses illustrate that racial conflict continues to exist in environments with little leadership and a lack of institutional support. Harper (2017) described five reasons for the lack of leadership in this area. First is a lack of care for Black communities; that is, Black students and other Students of Color continue to report acts of racism which they feel are ignored—as corroborated by higher education leaders who nonetheless reported that race relations are positive on their campuses (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019). Through her work on racial conflict, Vega (2021) interviewed 15 administrators and 20 students at a minority serving institution (MSI) and a historically white institution (HWT) and found that students felt administrators prioritized the safety of the institution over the students' experiences of racism. Additionally, due to administrative priorities, HESA professionals often felt torn between providing resources specifically for Students of Color, when they can provide resources for all students instead.

Second is professionals' lack of experience with racial oppression, which “do[es] not reflect these leaders' own lives and racial realities” (Harper, 2017, p. 120). Here, Harper (2017) referred to overwhelmingly white leaders in higher education whose lived experiences do not reflect those of Black students. Vega (2021) built on this perspective and demonstrated that HESA professionals, who were white or identified as People of Color, employed a historical lens through which they viewed racial conflict. Using a historical lens, HESA professionals viewed racial conflict as much more severe in the past than in the present day. This perspective suggests a color evasiveness that minimizes HESA professionals from seeing how Black students and other Students of Color are currently experiencing racism in the present time.

Third, Harper (2017) noted how open and honest discussions about racism are perceived as taboo on college campuses. Given that 80% of campus leaders believe that race relations are relatively positive (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019), these codes of silence suggest that institutional norms exist to impede conversations about race (Rahim, 2021). Institutional norms include the lack of curriculum focused on race, a center focused on race on campus, or lack of systems of evaluation of tenure and promotion that value professors who do work on racial equity. Vega (2021) also found that these codes of silence might be even more pervasive at MSIs such as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) because of the perception that they adequately serve all Students of Color. Further, within MSIs such as HSIs that elevate whiteness as a credential, these institutional norms may be even less apparent because of the designation that implies these institutions serve minoritized students (Vega et al., 2022).

Fourth, many HESA professionals have been miseducated or not informed about race and racism in their own academic programs. Harper (2017) argued that HESA professionals leave graduate programs with little to no knowledge or skills about how to address problems associated with race. Additionally, these professionals are socialized not to study race by the books and articles they are asked to read and explore as part of their graduate training programs.

Finally, Harper (2017) claimed that HESA professionals are unresponsive to racism due to competing priorities and an inability to see how prioritizing race and racism on campus could benefit them personally and the campus more broadly. In addressing the final point, Harper contended that while caring about humans who endure racial oppression is important, sharing how HESA

professionals can benefit is also necessary. That is, there is value to conceptualizing and implementing a model for racially responsive leadership that accurately addresses issues with racial conflict. Harper concluded that addressing racial conflict can save institutional costs related to retention and employment.

Racially responsive leadership is an important tool for addressing racial conflict. Yet, the literature does not reflect the specific ways HESA professionals learn about and are trained to address racial conflict as part of a racially responsive leadership framework. Given the absence of information and education that could be shared with HESA professionals, particularly given their role in building diverse environments, racial conflict work must be managed and led by competent and knowledgeable HESA professionals. Minimizing the importance of this work among HESA professionals encourages inaction and powerlessness when encountering racial conflict. Instead, how racial conflict is experienced by HESA professionals must be understood to encourage engagement in racially responsive ways. As such, I offer policy vacuums as a critical theoretical tool to explore racial conflict in postsecondary environments.

### **Theoretical Perspectives about Policy Vacuums**

Policy vacuums provide an important conceptual frame for analyzing how tasks and processes related to race are experienced in postsecondary education. Postsecondary researchers have used these perspectives to understand college readiness (Perna et al., 2012), teacher education (Gómez-Soler & Fuentes, 2021), postsecondary student fees (Callan, 1993), and higher education reform (Jameson, 1997). Policy vacuums reflect a lack of pressure and institutional guidance for processes often left to professionals to address. Policy vacuums are characterized by a lack of institutional commitment (Perna et al., 2012), insufficient strategies to manage complex issues (Gómez-Soler & Fuentes, 2021), exertion of administrative agency (Jameson, 1997), and lack of stakeholder awareness of policy benefits and consequences regarding complex issues (Callan, 1993).

The lack of institutional commitment to address a problem and insufficient strategies to implement a practice or policy are often observed as a low dedication of commitment and resources by leadership (Jameson, 1997; Perna et al., 2012). In a report on postsecondary readiness in the state of Washington, Perna et al. (2012) found that Governor Christine Gregoire pushed plans to increase baccalaureate degrees but did not have a successful follow-up method to implement those plans. Additionally, in interviews with state and higher education leaders, Perna and colleagues found that the governor did not have realistic goals and solutions to solve these issues. This was characterized as a lack of commitment to the governor's agenda resources to implement rigorous and realistic solutions.

Lack of commitment and strategies for policy problems can lead professionals to exert agency and guide processes on their own. Jameson (1997), who studied higher education reform in Ecuador, found that the reform process was largely "self-generated" (p. 265), or initiated by HESA professionals. Leon and Vega (2021) built on Jameson's perspectives of self-generated reform by analyzing the role of HESA professionals in Ecuador's 2010 reform efforts in higher education. Extending Perna et al. (2012) findings, Leon and Vega also found that while government-issued reforms were enacted, HESA professionals were provided with no guidance to implement those reforms, impelling HESA professionals to exert their own agency and act on their own. This was further corroborated by Gómez-Soler and Fuentes (2021), who found that educational policies do not exist to support Spanish heritage language learners (SHLL). Similar to Leon and Vega's findings, Gómez-Soler and Fuentes (2021) concluded that not only is self-generated policymaking important given how frequently professionals encounter these issues, but they should also be included in policymaking decisions such as implementation.

In addition to providing guidance and economic resources to create effective policies, stakeholders must have accurate data to be informed about benefits and consequences to such policies. Additionally, it is important for the HESA professionals implementing policies to be aware of their benefits or consequences. Harper (2017) argued that university leaders are not entirely aware of the benefits of creating policies to demonstrate racial responsiveness. Yet, articulating the importance of higher education to a greater public good (e.g., social justice and racial equity) allows taxpayers to see the benefits of a college education (Drezner et al., 2018). In a commentary about California's public higher education system and its implementation of student fees, Callan (1993) warned that stakeholders must be aware of the costs to policy changes; otherwise, policy vacuums are more likely to endure.

In sum, I used policy vacuums as a lens to view the work of HESA professionals who have encountered racial conflict issues. This lens clearly demonstrated how they have navigated environments where they are not encouraged to address or respond to racial conflict. Although policy vacuums have not been used as an analytical tool to understand racial conflict in postsecondary environments, there is evidence that university leaders do not provide guidance to address racial conflict (Harper, 2017); HESA professionals have a difficult time addressing racial conflict (Garces et al., 2021); and HESA professionals are not provided with training (Jones, 2019) or legal guidance (Kim et al., 2012). Therefore, I analyzed racial conflict by applying a policy vacuum lens and adhering to the following tenets: (a) strategies to address racial conflict; (b) exertion of administrative agency to create policies; and (c) stakeholders' awareness of possible effects of racial conflict policies.

## Methodology

I derived analysis for this paper from a larger study on the role of compositional diversity in racial conflict at an HWI and an MSI (Vega, 2021). The larger study, which included 35 participants, employed a cross-case analysis, where I aimed to explore two racially distinct institutions by examining perceptions of racial conflict among students, faculty, and HESA professionals. For this paper, I extracted the interviews with HESA professionals ( $n = 14$ ) relevant to my research questions. I utilized a phenomenological approach because I wanted to learn and understand the lived experiences of HESA professionals about their work environments related to racial conflict (Creswell, 2013). I was particularly interested in how HESA professionals made sense of their environments that may shape their ability to address racial conflict (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Questions guiding this work included: (a) How do HESA professionals navigate environments that do not provide guidance on racial conflict? (b) What training, knowledge, or skills do HESA professionals employ when handling incidents of racial conflict? I utilized qualitative methods grounded in policy vacuum perspectives which aim to explore environments lacking institutional guidance or pressure to act on problems. I did so by centering my analysis on responses to racial conflict and the postsecondary environments within which HESA professionals work.

## Study Setting

The purpose of the larger multiple-case study was to understand how compositional diversity played a role in perceptions of racial conflict. I had access to and chose institutions based on contrasting compositional and racially diverse populations. For example, one campus was comprised of more than 36% Students of Color, the other less. Hurtado and Ruiz Alvarado (2015) found that institutions of 36% or more underrepresented racial minorities (URM) reported the least number of racial incidents (12%), compared with institutions with less than 20% URM. I chose the MSI because it had over 36% URM population and the HWI because of its >20% URM population.

## Participant Selection

I focused on 14 HESA professionals with decision-making responsibilities who were in positions to hear about various forms of racial conflict incidents, had addressed incidents of racial conflict between students, or led diversity trainings for their institutions and other organizations. Table 1 details the specific participants.

**Table 1**

*Respondents—Minority Serving Institution (MSI) and Historically White Institution (HWI)*

MSI		HWI	
Name & Race	Position	Name & Race	Position
Patricia, Black woman	Senior-Level Administrator (Student Affairs)	Laura, African American Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Human Resources)
Mildred, Latina Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Student Affairs)	Kamala, Latina Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Human Resources)
David, African American Man	Senior-Level Administrator (Academic Affairs)	Aisha, Latina Woman	Entry-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)
Keisha, Afro Latina Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)	Saul, White Man	Mid-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)
John, African American Man	Mid-level Manager (Student Affairs)	Judy, African American Woman	Senior-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)
Chad, African American Man	Chair, Campus Climate committee	Mary, African American Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Student Affairs)
		Daniel, White Man	Senior Level Manager (Student Services)
		Teka, Latina Woman	Senior Level Manager (Student Affairs)

I identified respondents in two ways: (a) I reviewed university websites to identify professionals with decision-making responsibilities, and (b) I utilized the snowballing technique—a method using word-of-mouth to contact respondents. According to Patton (1990), this approach locates “information-rich key informants or critical cases” (p. 176). Specifically, I sought respondents who were positioned informants knowledgeable about diversity, racism, or conflict or able to address these issues on their campuses (Kezar, 2002). These professionals had decision-making responsibilities in the position of *hearing* about racial conflict incidents, regardless of responding at the organizational level (Harper & Hurtado, 2007); that is, some of these participants were told about these events but lacked administrative power to handle them directly. While the

larger study was focused on the role of compositional diversity in shaping the perceptions of racial conflict by students, faculty, and administrators, that study revealed that HESA professionals lacked guidance in how to respond to racial conflict. As such, I focused on interviews with HESA professionals to better understand this finding.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Between 2013 and 2015, I conducted a total of 35 in-person interviews that lasted 45 to 60 minutes each. My interview protocol was centered on questions such as: What are responses to racial conflict that you have used or observed? What knowledge or training was used to describe and address racial conflict? For this analysis, I employed inductive qualitative coding, utilizing codes that were informed by research on policy vacuums. These codes began with three large areas: (a) strategies to address racial conflict; (b) administrative agency to create practices or policies; and (c) stakeholders' awareness of effects of racial conflict policies.

I entered the codes in Dedoose software and applied them to the 14 interviews with HESA professionals. I used a constant comparative approach to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed me to use inductive codes and compare them across themes. Using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I coded for policy vacuums to explore the environment in which HESA professionals work. I began with three codes: Knowledge of Racial Conflict, Training for Racial Conflict, and Addressing Racial Conflict. After coding a representative set of five interviews with these themes, I identified emerging themes and created new subcodes to align with them. Thus, I could identify themes inductively within the broader framework of policy vacuums (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I applied this new set of codes to the remaining interviews (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Codes*

Original Codes	Themes (after initial round of coding)	Subthemes
Knowledge about Racial Conflict	Doubt “Everyday Racial Encounters” Reported Incidents as Barometer of Severity	Structural
Training	Duty—No Training Learning on the Job Home Training Academic Training Self-education	Academic Training Student Affairs Training Learning on the Job No Training
Addressing/Handling	No Real Process Diverse Modes of Response	Institutional Commitment to Diversity Programming Reliance on Students' Ability to Work through Issues Awareness of No Accountability Agency



To enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I triangulated and contextualized the interview data by consulting institutional documents, newspapers, and media to verify respondents' comments about racial conflict. I also re-contacted respondents to ensure accuracy of responses and trustworthy research.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research reveals the transferability of a study, the credibility of the research methods, and the reflexivity of the researcher. This is done to demonstrate rigor in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). To achieve credibility, I learned about the postsecondary institutions through archival material, consulting appropriate documents such as school conduct codes and hate crime reports. This material was useful in triangulating the data I collected from interviews. I also re-contacted respondents to ensure their responses were accurately recorded or understood. As I collected the data, I presented some of this work at national conferences and discussed findings with peers who were unfamiliar with my work. Throughout this process, I was also reflective about my work by providing a limitations and positionality statement in this paper. Finally, to achieve transferability, I provided a thick description of the case by sharing information about the organization and the study, including codes and information about the participants.

### **Limitations**

Transparency aids in the rigor of this research, and I acknowledge that this study has some limitations. First, the study utilized participant interviews from two institutions—one historically white postsecondary institution and the other a minority-serving institution. Second, the data were collected at a particular time (2013-2015), which limits how racial conflict may be understood and racial ideologies shaped.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Race and ethnicity are important intersectional factors in my life, shaping who I am and how I make life decisions. One such decision included becoming a HESA professional who worked specifically with low-income Students of Color, given my own experiences as a low-income Student of Color whose parents immigrated from Ecuador. During that time, I was interested in how professionals make decisions about racist incidents in higher education. As a racism-conscious higher education administrator working with Students of Color from low-income backgrounds, I was aware of the concerns professionals often felt when attempting to support students who experienced racism on their campuses, such as being treated as troublemakers or feeling powerless to address these concerns (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). As a member of various administrative groups focusing on diversity and improving the racial climate, I was also aware of the reluctance of some professionals to discuss race and racism in their institution. Colleagues often experienced consciousness-powerlessness—what professionals experience when they recognize that racism exists but feel powerless to address such incidents (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For these reasons, I chose to engage in semi-structured and confidential interviews with participants. I thought it appropriate to ensure more confidentiality by talking with participants one-on-one. Additionally, I chose a phenomenological approach to learn about HESA professionals' lived experiences with understanding and addressing racial conflict. Finally, given my role as a HESA professional during the time of this study, it was also important for me to engage in a case study analysis as I knew context mattered to how racial conflict was understood and addressed.

## Findings

My data suggested that HESA professionals worked within higher education environments that did not provide training to act on racial conflict, and they relied on informal responses that were often self-guided. While the 14 HESA professionals who spoke to me were concerned about students and their experiences with racial conflict, their postsecondary organizations—one HWI and one MSI—created environments for racial conflict inaction. My findings were consistent with studies that used the concept of policy vacuums (Gómez-Soler & Fuentes, 2021; Jameson, 1997; Perna et al., 2012) to describe environments that provided professionals with little to no support to address racial conflict on their campuses. In the absence of higher education guidance, HESA professionals overly relied on self-guided training, personal experiences, and students' ability to figure out how to address racial conflict on their own; they also experienced little follow-through from campus leadership and the community. Findings were organized around two themes: Training and Responses.

### **“How Am I Trained?”: Administrative Agency in Racial Conflict Training**

I asked HESA professionals about their training to address racial conflict. This theme was characterized by self-administered strategies on which they relied to recognize and address racial conflict. The varied strategies included: (a) Learning on the Job, (b) Home Training, (c) Academic Training, and (d) Self-Education. This awareness provided HESA professionals with some agency to exert professional judgment when addressing racial conflict and no guidance by the institution. As such, the responses are varied regarding the knowledge, skills, or training they utilized when addressing racial conflict.

#### ***Learning on the Job***

When I asked about training to address racial conflict, the HESA professionals offered various responses. All of them responded that they did not receive training about racial conflict specifically from their institution. For example, Saul a mid-level manager in Academic Affairs discussed not having formal training and learning various skills “on the job”:

So, this is hard. How am I trained? That's[chuckling] a really great question. You know, in many ways, I feel like I haven't had formal training. But, when I took the position at [another HWI] as the director of [diversity office], I learned a lot on the job, to be honest with you. I [also] love doing diversity trainings. And so, in the process of training, you also learn a lot.

Questions about training often led participants to pause before responding that they had no “formal” training. In fact, Saul stated that his skills derived from diversity trainings he put together himself. This kind of on-the-job training extended Jones's (2019) finding that diversity professionals are not provided standard training yet are expected to carry out the mission and vision of higher education institutions suggesting that diversity is one of their values. In this reflection, Saul did not specifically address racial conflict in his diversity trainings but did learn about responding to racial conflict through other forms of diversity.

HESA professionals often receive training from HESA academic programs. While HESA programs have been much more diligent about including diversity in their curriculum, HESA programs continue to lack racially responsive leadership training (Harper, 2017). HESA professionals discussed not having any formal training in racial conflict but noted that their learning came from their academic training and as part of their student affairs work. A senior-level administrator in student affairs, Patricia, noted that training for racial conflict is or should be a part

of the background of all HESA professionals. Calling the handling of racial conflict as the “DNA” of a practitioner, she said:

I think everyone in our division has a master’s degree and a lot of experience. So, they should know...I mean it should be a part of their DNA of what level to make a referral or how to handle a situation. I believe that everybody knows when they have to do that or when they have to break through the red tape.

Given the nature of the work of HESA professionals are administrators dedicated to the social, academic, and emotional lives of students, Patricia discussed this as being the core value of HESA professionals. Like Saul, Patricia reinforced the idea that these professionals are expected to *know* intrinsically how to address racial conflict without organizational guidance, and that the “DNA” of a HESA professional is enough to be racially responsive.

HESA professionals who were also classroom instructors shared experiences with racial conflict both inside and outside of the classroom. Chad, a former faculty member, became a dean charged with directing a campus racial climate report. Chad shared that faculty and department chairs do need training to address and understand racial conflict. When I asked about how to address racial conflict, Chad said:

Training your chairs...about supporting your faculty members [and] mentoring them. If I were the provost, these are the discussions I would have with my deans. I think some people don’t see the value that it really has in the sense that the world is getting Browner.... And so, I would talk to my deans and my chairs about what kind of programs that you have to support this individual that we have hired.

Chad has held various roles on his campus as faculty and as an administrator. The conflict he highlighted is support (or lack thereof) for People of Color who are hired as faculty or administrators charged with working with students. As such, he was reflective about the needs of faculty and administrators; he acknowledged that as the campus becomes more diverse (i.e., “Browner”) and he has encountered or managed various forms of racial conflict, these types of training would be critical to work adequately within diverse environments. Thus, his focus was not only on students but on various stakeholders within the institution who work directly with students.

### ***Home Training***

Developing a “sense” of how to address issues of racial conflict was mentioned by many of the participants. Judy, a senior-level professional in academic affairs, discussed training for racial conflict by what she called “home training”—skills she learned at home with two community-oriented parents whose family grew up in white neighborhoods:

The other is far more in terms of a sense of home training. We were raised and had friends in lots of different communities at a time when people didn’t always do that and didn’t have that opportunity but part of that was also, in between running a settlement house, my dad also raised money for it to work. So, he had to know white people because a lot of them were the ones at that time who had the money. Being comfortable in those settings was also a big part for him and his family, for him to do his job.

This sense developed over time, as Judy expressed, reinforced in professional positions such as her work as an attorney prior to working in academic affairs. As an attorney, she learned “some of the sense of being able to weigh and balance the notion of what’s appropriate or not.” Judy explained that the combination of home training, being raised by two Black parents, and her work as

a lawyer provided her with a strong foundation for teachable moments beyond the classroom concerning racial conflict. Judy's thoughts on home training are helpful to understand Harper's (2017) argument that higher education leaders are unable to respond to racial conflict because they often do not share similar backgrounds as the people most affected by racism. Harper was clear, however, that higher education leaders can be more racially responsive if they undergo training that is centered on racial justice.

### ***Academic Training***

Some participants referred to their own academic backgrounds as places where they learned to understand and address racial conflict. For example, Mary, a HWI mid-level manager in student affairs, was trained to facilitate difficult dialogues through a youth organization where she learned some of these skills. However, this was not part of her training in her HESA position; rather, this led to her own training by reading further in this area:

I was trained as a facilitator, facilitating difficult dialogues. I was trained through a particular organization that focused on diversity, youth development, team building. They had a focus on facilitating groups, and so right out of college, it was really helpful. That was my training. And then in college, I majored in sociology, women's studies with a focus on race and culture. So, I got content-based knowledge through undergrad, but then I continued to do my own reading.

Participants often referred to their academic backgrounds to discuss what Mary described as "content-based knowledge" about racial conflict. Content knowledge is a deep understanding of a subject, including theories, ideas, principles, and key vocabulary and literacies. Similar to pedagogical content knowledge exhibited by teachers (see Shulman, 1986), some HESA professionals are responsible for the learning that happens outside of the classroom—yet unlike teachers, HESA professionals are not guided by a curriculum, especially when race-related matters are concerned. Here, Mary brought together training and knowledge about racial conflict—training as practice-based work and knowledge stemming from her academic work beginning as an undergraduate. When discussing racial conflict, participants often referred to knowledge derived from undergraduate course work and continuing to graduate school. Keisha, a mid-level administrator in academic affairs at an MSI, also noted her undergraduate background and scholarly work:

I would say it's [knowledge or training about racial conflict] mainly because this is what I've dedicated most of my work to in the context of Afro Latino studies, but I've had an interest in just understanding race and racism ever since I took a psychology of oppression course as an undergrad. I feel like I can definitely see it in a sense because I've been trained to.

Here, Keisha also shared information about her academic background, which she has focused on race and racism to derive her knowledge to understand and address racial conflict. She rooted this in classes such as psychology but extended it to race and ethnic studies courses and programs, such as courses focused on AfroLatinidad. Keisha's reflection is a reminder of the importance of a racially and culturally relevant curriculum that helps university stakeholders understand why race continues to be contested and conflicts continue to rise.

### ***Self-Education***

All participants engaged in what Teka, a senior-level administrator in student affairs at the HWI, called "self-education," where professionals engage in reading about topics related to racial diversity and conflict. The earlier quotes often reflected the agency with which participants did their

own reading on race and racial conflict. Teka specifically identified the use of self-education in response to the lack of institutional training and support professionals receive to address racial conflict. Teka stated:

I do a lot of self-education. I do a lot of reading. I'm always interested in research and data. One of the first things I do when I get up in the morning is read. I read for about a good half-hour. Articles, little snippets that are happening on other campuses, and I really do think about that, you know? Whenever I see newspaper articles, I share it with my staff members and, conversely, they share things that come across their desk with me.

Self-education or readings outside of a course or curriculum of study is important to continue awareness and knowledge of an issue or a problem. Yet when self-education is the only source of knowledge HESA professionals are receiving to learn and address racial conflict, then definitions, theories, and principles of racial conflict are not cohesive or coherent even within the same organization.

Overall, HESA professionals did not receive any consistent or formal guidance to address incidents of racial conflict. While they were aware of the existence of racial conflict, their descriptions were somewhat shaped by what existed regarding definitions for bias incidents and hate crimes, but not by much guidance to address problems of racial microaggressions or policy disagreements related to racial conflict. Instead, they relied heavily on their academic background, on-the-job training such as in student affairs, lessons they learned from home, and, finally, self-education through reading and current news. In these ways, they relied on and exerted their own agency to inform practices and policies to address racial conflict.

### **“No Real Process to Deal with It”: Varied Modes of Responses**

I explored how HESA professionals responded to racial conflict to understand any of the strategies they utilized. No participant described an institutional commitment to addressing racial conflict. Thus, all participants in this study discussed varied modes of responses. All participants said that strategies were clearer when the incident was violent or a “policy violation.” Mary, an HWI mid-level manager in student affairs, discussed the severity of racial conflict to demonstrate how her institution responded:

There's no real process for dealing with [racial conflict] ...unless there was a policy violation—and policy violations are determined by the university. It's like you did something really extreme to somebody. If you just said a hurtful, racial comment that was insensitive, that's not technically a policy violation. So...there's nothing that we can really do to respond.

Here, Mary described a powerlessness in her ability to respond to verbal forms of racial conflict due to lack of guidance by the institution. Garces et al. (2021) pointed out that this is common for institutions as the First Amendment disallows guidance for hurtful speech that is not considered violent. Yet, Mary recognized that certain important forms of racial conflict need addressing; this suggests that she was conscious of racial conflict yet also felt a sense of powerlessness to address these incidents, as described by Harper and Hurtado (2007).

### ***University Statements***

Participants shared that some incidents of racial conflict are addressed via statements delivered by university leaders. Aisha, an HAWI entry-level manager in academic affairs, believed a response from professionals becomes routine and “what they do now”:

So, I think what they do now is that if something happens sometimes...the dean actually wrote a response to the community saying this wasn't okay.... Then our dean and some other people met with...any students that were impacted to talk about the event, how were they feeling. And then generally, there's some sort of educational component that happens afterwards, so a community discussion or forum.

These informal modes of responding have been documented yet critiqued (Wesley et al., 2021). For one, these responses, while routine, according to Aisha, are not a stated policy that could minimize the impact of these forms of racial conflict or prevent them from occurring. University statements deliver important information about community values and beliefs (Cole & Harper, 2017), yet students have found them to be without clear guidance and, therefore, ineffective to produce stated missions and goals of racial justice evoked by institutional leaders (Wesley et al., 2021). Participants shared that statements are often followed up by individual conversations with university administrators such as the Dean of Students and educational programming. While participants believed that this is how the sequence of events occurs after an incident of racial conflict has been denounced in a public statement, it is not always outlined in statements that may reach students.

### ***Student-Led Programming***

Participants who spoke about educational programming shared that diversity programming is student-led. It was clear that there is an institutional commitment to student programming and their responsibility over issues related to diversity. For example, some participants explained that students should be able to work through these issues on their own and use student organizations to support them. After asking Mildred, a mid-level administrator at an MSI, how she advised students when an incident arose, she suggested they go through established forms of reporting, such as the student government. She encouraged students to use student government because it is considered the “voice of the students.”

As such, HESA professionals relied on students to self-manage complaints, as evidenced by their mention of student life programming and student responsibility. These diversity programming events, while not addressing racial conflict head-on, seemed to be the place where they preemptively responded to conflict as a place where students can ask difficult questions about various diversity topics. Patricia, a senior-level administrator in student affairs at the MSI, elaborated:

The student life activity program committee helped to plan a lot of the content of the different events that we do on campus.... We have diversity talks once a month. We'll have different topics, topics that students don't necessarily get to talk about in the classroom, but they want to talk about because topics that are affecting them.... So, we kind of open up their minds a little but with certain exercises just to get them thinking about these things, and then support it with things like the diversity talks, but we also have our culture heritage months which we oversee.

Patricia described the importance of student life programming and pointed to student affairs administrators' role to ensure these programs are educational and supportive, particularly during difficult moments with racial conflict that students may be experiencing. This pivot from institutional responsibility to student onus for addressing racial conflict suggests a lack of strategies that HESA professionals would find useful to develop as knowledge or competencies in the area of racial conflict.

For another participant at an HWI, the severity of racial conflict determines the student response. One mid-level HESA professional discussed racial conflict as interpersonal interactions

where students feel targeted based on their race. She described students as being able to name their experiences and thus desiring to have more conversations about this kind of racial conflict:

I think there are some students that come to campus really wanting to take a look at social justice.... Our students are smart, so they want to talk about everything, right? They want to have vibrant discussions and really intellectual conversations. So, I think if you talk with some of those students in particular, they'll say, you know, that there's racism that happens all the time here. For the students who really come from a lens of social justice, they will very easily and readily talk about microaggressions and institutionalized racism on campus. Right? Because that's part of their lens and that's part of how they want to engage, you know, in a really vibrant way.

The HESA professionals with whom I spoke were very proud of students for their ability to discuss racial conflict in complex ways. In a sense, their belief that student programming could be a part of the response process to racial conflict is not surprising, given the lack of institutional responses they experience as a whole and the fact that HESA professionals are responsible for the students' learning outside of the classroom.

### ***Student Complaint Procedure***

John, an MSI mid-level administrator in student affairs, admitted he really could not do much about an incident of racial conflict unless it was overt and advised students to address it on their own first. This was corroborated by Garces et al.'s 2021 work suggesting that HESA professionals have limits in how they respond to racial conflict due to restrictions related to the First Amendment. Further, John stated that their office uses a formal procedure to discuss this with students during Orientation.

There's a student complaint procedure. As I mentioned, we're in charge of new student orientation, so we go through all this with freshmen—[the message is] “if anybody bothers you, go to the Dean of Students office....” There's a student complaint procedure that students are made aware of.

Orientation and other such onboarding activities for students are great times for students to learn not only about the culture of the university but also about policies and procedures associated with campus student life. During this time, students may also learn who the Dean of Students is or the equivalent on their campuses. From my conversations with participants, it was not clear what happens once students bring their concerns about racial conflict to the dean.

While this level of action is important, professionals sensed in some cases that students did not trust them regarding racial conflict. Judy, a senior-level professional in academic affairs at the HWI, believed that leaders should speak more with students about difficult issues specifically related to race.

But I think [students] felt that the administration couldn't be trusted to do the right thing for the community. And I think it's a necessary conversation. It's an opportunity. It's a teachable moment.

HESA professionals are often charged with these teachable moments that also happen outside of the classroom (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2023). Yet, how can HESA professionals be expected to fulfill their responsibilities if, in these moments, they are not trained to address racial conflict and have disparate, informal response mechanisms to address some of the most pressing issues on campus?

### ***Reports on Racial Incidents and Racial Climate***

For responses that were institutionalized, such as bias incident reports, some participants used the bias incident report to share students' reports about racial microaggressions. Participants mentioned that such data as bias incident reports are only used for the most overt forms of conflict. Although participants who reported microaggressions on bias incident reports were asked only to report physical and overt forms, some felt this was necessary to demonstrate the frequency of interpersonal racial conflicts. One participant, Saul, a senior-level administrator of student affairs at an HWI, said:

This is where I started to really use the new system. I did an incident report and people didn't really know what to do about it. They were like uh, I'm not sure; this [racial microaggression] doesn't really fall.... And I think for me, it was more to put a mirror up and say this is what we see a lot; how is this [racial microaggression] different from this report I did on a student related to gender-based misconduct?

The participant, who was a mid-level manager in student affairs, continued to describe why bias incident reports are processes that must be challenged more:

I have encouraged the whole staff to do it, too. Because again, even if it's just data collection, why is the process for responding to racial bias different than the process responding to gender-based misconduct when both are protected classes?... How do we respond with one-on-one situations? I mean there's just not enough...and it's not consistent.... There's not a clear process....

In some cases, participants discussed that results from these more formal reports were often met with little to no action. One example included campus climate reports. Research has confirmed that data from campus climate reports are not often used to implement viable practices or policies and are, instead, used for symbolic purposes (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Although campus climate reports were produced, one administrator shared that not much guidance was provided after the reports were completed and shared with the campus. Chad, in charge of chairing the campus climate committee, had high hopes for the study he led. But he said not many read the report, and not much accountability was enforced on administration to carry out the report findings:

When I started chairing this committee and we produced this report, I thought it would have an impact. Many people have not read the report, despite the fact that it was distributed to all the faculty, you know, via a web link and a hard copy. What I'm hoping for now is [coordinating] a major [diversity] conference. But I think what is lacking is even though the president has expressed this overall commitment to diversity, there hasn't been a lot of accountability among professionals, chairs, search committees.

In short, participants felt that higher education leaders desired campus diversity, but, as Chad noted, stakeholders resisted accountability to deal with racial conflicts. While efforts were already in place (i.e., student organizations, Orientation, complaint procedures), many of these efforts were not the result of studies to understand the racial environment of the campus. Additionally, there is no evidence that concrete practices or policies were developed or reviewed after bias incidents reports were made. Chad mentioned the lack of guidance by the institution to explore policies and practices directly related to the campus climate report he coordinated. Instead, Chad exerted his agency as a senior-level administrator and former faculty member to conceptualize a conference to discuss, address, and learn more about the issues that came up in the report. A conference is a way to share



knowledge about areas, and while this is important for any organization, building a learning culture in a university is especially important. While conferences can be viewed as one form of training, they are not mandatory, and it is not clear how conferences can support HESA professionals with strategies to address racial conflict. In a higher education policy vacuum, conferences may just be one way to fill the void in training and responses to racial conflict.

## Discussion

This work captured the ways HESA professionals navigate institutional policy vacuums (addressing the first research question) and the knowledge, skills, or training HESA professionals utilize when addressing racial conflict (addressing the second research question). Findings from this study revealed that participants, in the absence of institutional guidance, took it upon themselves to gather their own training to understand racial conflict. Professionals identified the various forms of training they chose, ranging from “learning on the job” to “home training”; this was mostly characterized by what they learned about race and how to handle racism as People of Color, with some of the participants identifying as Black. Additionally, professionals also identified academic training such as theories and concepts related to race and racism that they learned from undergraduate and graduate school. Participants such as Keisha and Mary identified specific academic training focused on race that provided a more robust knowledge of race. In lieu of an environment that actively educates its stakeholders about race, participants such as Teka identified what they called “self-education,” whereby they actively read books and articles about racial conflict, sometimes reviewing what was reported on other campuses. Self-education, ranging from being raised to consider racial conflict issues to learning on-the-job or focusing their undergraduate or graduate education on race, was widely employed, thus reflecting an individual behavior to learning more about racial conflict. Unfortunately, this individual behavior was not met with an institutional commitment to provide administrative support for a very real and persistent problem. This demonstrated participants acting on their *dispositions*, i.e., behaviors and attitudes as HESA professionals, and committed to the well-being of all students. However, this does not guarantee that all HESA professionals will dedicate the time, space, and energy necessary to understand racial conflict.

Part of the dispositions related to HESA professionals in this study included an exertion of their own agency. This finding also extended Jameson’s (1997) work, which revealed that the lack of state or institutional guidance creates policy vacuums for professionals to enact practices or policies effectively. This was evidenced by the ways participants in this study were unclear about how these conflicts should be addressed. One example was the use of bias incident reports, which are designed to capture overt and more violent forms of incidents. Some professionals such as Saul and Mary, both professionals at the HWI, mentioned the use of bias incident reports yet still had questions over what exactly should go into those reports and how students could report everyday forms of racial conflict (e.g., microaggressions). Extending Perna et al.’s (2012) findings, my findings suggest that professionals who work within policy vacuums lack support and resources to develop appropriate strategies and thus have developed self-generated strategies to address racial conflict. Without general institutional guidance or a standard way to address racial conflict, it is likely that professionals have too broad or nonspecific ways to manage racial conflict. Some participants shared that they relied on student programming, for example, that could be understood as inaction by HESA professionals. Some participants I spoke with, such as Judy, recognized this as students believing that administrators cannot be trusted to do the right thing when it comes to racial conflict.

While I heard about the emphasis and importance of diversity initiatives at both institutions, neither institution could identify a training that was specific to recognizing and responding to racial

conflict. This propelled Chad, an MSI administrator, to move beyond the scope of his work from coordinating a campus racial climate report to planning a diversity conference after realizing there was no commitment to addressing the report's findings. Chad, like other participants, developed their own strategies because many felt it was their duty to learn and teach about racial conflict to support more students. The sense of personal duty and agency to learn about racial conflict was evident among all participants, especially Patricia who thought these were "teachable moments." These dispositions held by the participants were evident—their behaviors and values were oriented to at least learning about racial conflict and supporting students who encountered it. Yet, similar to Gómez-Soler and Fuentes's (2021) findings, professionals had to exert their own agency to develop strategies for educational issues when they work within policy vacuums.

Additionally, lack of institutional guidance to support HESA professionals meant that participants had to rely on other non-standardized strategies to address racial conflict. One such strategy was the reliance on students to be able to handle racial conflict on their own. Although student activists have traditionally played an important role in institutional change and racial reconstitution (Kendi, 2012), participants believed students were capable of handling incidents without much strategic guidance by professionals. Participants also believed that students were capable of handling racial conflict because of the availability of student organizations and diversity-related programming. The use of diversity-related programming and student organizations to handle racial conflict can be perceived as a *laissez-faire* or hands-off approach to dealing with racial conflict that can then be interpreted as a lack of racial care (Foreman & Lewis, 2015; Harper, 2017). As such, while participants spoke about much activity around diversity on both campuses, there seemed to be little to no institutional commitment (i.e., resources, labor) to address racial conflict. This lack of commitment is characterized by ill-fitting policies such as bias incident reports and diversity-related programming that may or may not address nonphysical forms of conflict.

Awareness of benefits and consequences to racial conflict policies (Harper, 2017) can encourage HESA professionals' ability to address issues found in policy vacuums (Callan, 1993). Harper (2017) stated that a possible cause to the lack of racial leadership includes leaders' inability to see themselves as relating to those who could benefit from racial conflict policies such as addressing microaggressions. Additionally, Harper stated that racially responsive leadership must include an awareness about the effects of policies related to race on campus. While stakeholders were not aware of benefits and consequences to racial conflict policies, participants expressed frustration with limitations to the practices they utilized when incidents happened. For example, participants who mentioned a bias response system discussed that a committee gathers to review how to respond to reported incidents. However, they expressed concern that these systems rarely captured subtle incidents of racial conflict such as microaggressions. Another participant was visibly frustrated at the lack of response to the climate report they coordinated. As Callan (1993) stated, stakeholders who not only read reports or studies regarding policies but also clearly understood what was at stake by addressing the issues would more likely feel a personal duty to address them. Participants felt the same way about the bias incident reports and racial climate reports in which they were involved. In many instances, they felt this would also mean there would be a shared responsibility to address racial conflict instead of just one or a few administrators to engage in this work.

## **Implications**

This study has several implications for research. First, regarding research, more work is necessary to understand institutional commitment regarding racial conflict. This leads to questions such as: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to respond to racial conflict?

What kinds of resources are college and universities willing to designate specifically to manage racial conflict? What is the budget to train racially responsive professionals?

Second, more research should focus on HESA professionals' agency when they respond to racial conflict incidents. My study demonstrated that HESA professionals' whose dispositions were inclined to understand race via their academic training such as Keisha were often met with an environment that lacked racially responsive ways to support HESA professionals to capture the conflicts they were hearing from students. When this happens, HESA professionals could seem to be going against what campuses already have in place such as bias incident reports that capture more overt forms of racial conflict and not interpersonal ones.

Third, more research should focus on the relationship between racial conflict policy vacuums and inaction among stakeholders. Some participants in this study chose inaction because the processes in place to address racial conflict often included passing the responsibility to someone else such as a dean or relying on students to create diversity-related programming. While this may seem like inaction, an argument could be made that HESA professionals have exerted some agency by following procedures already in place at their campus. As such, important questions to investigate further would be: In what ways are campus policies addressing racial conflict? How effective are racial conflict policies and practices?

Fourth, more research could center on how racial conflict is understood in campus violence research. My findings demonstrated that HESA professionals were aware of the experiences of Students of Color with everyday forms of racial conflict, but campus crime reports suggested that campuses are not experiencing any racial conflict. This could be a reason why university leaders and students vary in their experiences with racial conflict (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019). The professionals in this study reported that these everyday forms led to racial tension in the school climate. This suggests the need to address two types of organizational conflict: (a) the distinct difference between how professionals understand racial conflict and how students describe racial conflict (Vega, 2021); and (b) professionals' administrative ability to address violent forms of conflict while lacking guidance to address everyday forms of racial conflict that students have reported. My findings demonstrated that, in many ways, this type of organizational conflict is an indicator of a campus racial culture (Museus et al., 2012) that lacks racial responsiveness.

Finally, more research could focus on studying the self-generated and short-term practices and policies that HESA professionals utilize in the absence of institutional guidance for racial conflict. Findings from this study extended Callan's (1993) perspectives that short-term practices may have long-term consequences and should be properly analyzed. By short term, Callan referred to the practices developed by practitioners without guidance by institutional or state stakeholders. These short-term practices are short term because they are not institutionalized and can go away. Managing such a critical phenomenon pervading college campuses today demands the use of long-term, evidence-based practices that should be part of the organizational culture.

This study has important implications for policy and practice. Regarding policy, professionals would also benefit from understanding the benefits and consequences of implementing racial conflict policies. For example, Saul explained that policies such as FERPA often do not allow professionals to be as forthcoming with students about how certain incidents are handled. By contrast, not all stakeholders are aware that such policies may exist and, therefore, do not know what consequences may occur should an incident of racial conflict arise. Being clear about what racial conflict looks like on individual campuses and how to manage them are important steps.

Another implication for practice includes working with graduate programs in higher education and student affairs to make racial conflict training a part of the curriculum. Patricia, a participant who was a senior-level administrator in an MSI, referred to the ability to understand and address racial conflict as the "DNA" of a HESA professional. Yet, Harper (2017) found that higher

education and student affairs graduate programs do not provide adequate education to become racially responsive leaders. Having dispositions related to racial conflict is important but not sufficient and very different from having knowledge or skills to understand and address a persistent problem. Thus, the DNA of the HESA professional must include a more robust HESA academic program that includes handling conflicts particularly as they relate to race.

Finally, policymakers, practitioners, scholars, and students should come together to build a racially responsive framework for HESA practitioners. This racially responsive framework could contain theory, knowledge, reflectiveness, and programming centered on an important tenet to organizational conflict—that conflict is permanent. Similar to critical race theorists who believe that racism is a permanent part of society, a racially responsive framework for HESA professionals must learn that racial conflict is not aberrant; rather, it is a process that could create important outcomes for racially minoritized people depending on how racial conflict is handled, particularly within a higher education policy vacuum. Relying on individual HESA professionals' behaviors and attitudes to address racial conflict is simply not enough. Thus, to fill a racial conflict vacuum, HESA professionals must include a racially responsive framework—a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to race and supported by their campus leadership—in their work and practice if they are serious about the work of racial equity and justice.

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Born and raised in New York City, Dr. Blanca Elizabeth Vega is the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants. Dr. Vega earned a doctorate (Ed.D.) from the Higher and Postsecondary Education program at Teachers College, Columbia University and is currently Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Montclair State University. Dr. Vega's scholarship broadly focuses on the role of higher education and student affairs administrators in building more racially just environments. Her primary area of research situates racism as one of multiple barriers that can impact higher education experiences and success—not just for students, but also for administrators and faculty. She is currently studying perceptions of racial conflict; the role of racialized ideologies in racial conflict; and policies related to racial conflict. Her secondary area of research explores leadership and policymaking concerning undocumented students. Finally, Dr. Vega continues to explore Latinidad in higher education and HSIs as racialized organizations.

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