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Emotional Labor: Institutional Responsibility and Strategies to Offer Emotional Support for Leaders Engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work

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Leaders from marginalized groups disproportionately shoulder emotional labor resulting from the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education. This emotional burden can lead to stress and mental health consequences. Institutions bear the responsibility of addressing the emotional burden. This multiple-case qualitative study aimed to identify effective institutional strategies to alleviate emotional labor. We interviewed 107 leaders at eight institutions to examine their experiences with emotional labor and institutional support. We selected institutions based on their progress toward DEI. Leaders were chosen based on being involved directly in the DEI work within a shared leadership effort. Drawing on Ahmed's theory of diversity work and Zembylas's critical emotional praxis, we identified the following themes: sharing DEI responsibilities with many leaders, creating spaces for emotions, and role-modeling the desired behaviors to build positive relationships and trust. Through these strategies, institutions can reduce emotional labor and create equitable environments for DEI leaders.

Keywords: *diversity, equity, higher education, leadership, organization theory/change, collaboration, case studies, in-depth interviewing, qualitative research, emotional labor, institutional strategy, institutional support*

As leaders in higher education increasingly understand the importance of prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on their campuses, there is a growing awareness of the inherently emotional nature of DEI work (Jones & Kee, 2021). Indeed, DEI efforts often emerge in response to acts of violence and injustice on college campuses and elsewhere, such as racist graffiti, speech incidents, campus arrests, hate crimes, and police brutality, which evoke intense emotions. Recently, many states across the United States have introduced anti-DEI legislation. These laws ban or restrict DEI policies and initiatives on college campuses, arguing that DEI is "discriminatory" and favors certain groups over others based on identity. In such contexts, daily advocacy for DEI encounters various forms of resistance and carries a significant emotional burden. This emotionally taxing work is called emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983).

The adverse impacts of emotional labor are important to explore. Emotional labor can lead to feelings of alienation, stress, and burnout (Anderson, 2020; Arnold et al., 2021; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2022; Lerma et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018; Padilla, 1994; Porter et al., 2018). Even more concerning is that individuals from historically marginalized groups shoulder a disproportionate burden of emotional labor in DEI work (Humphrey, 2022; Wharton, 2009). Often, the DEI responsibility falls upon these groups based on the assumption that DEI work should be conducted by those impacted by inequitable systems. Within the structure of DEI work, institutions exploit these groups and reproduce myriad inequities (Wingfield, 2021). It is imperative to disrupt this cycle of reproduction of inequities as it further imposes an undue burden on minoritized groups.

The purpose of this study was to better understand effective strategies for mitigating emotional labor in the context of DEI initiatives within higher education. To achieve this, we conducted a multiple-case qualitative study and analyzed the experiences of over 100 DEI leaders across eight colleges and universities that had a strong record of advancing a DEI agenda through shared leadership approaches. Leaders in this article and in our research are defined in nonpositional ways and include anyone who pursues change. We acknowledge that there are leaders with different agency operating at the grassroots, midlevel and senior levels, but we define leadership and leaders as encompassing all who pursue change across these various levels.

To understand the complexities of emotional labor experienced by DEI leaders, we draw on Ahmed's insightful theorization of diversity work and emotions from her work in 2010 and 2013 as well as the concept of critical emotional praxis introduced by Zembylas (2015). In our analysis, we emphasized institutional rather than individual approaches to address emotional labor and its adverse effects on DEI leaders. By focusing on institutional approaches, we highlight the importance of acknowledging institutional responsibility for imposing an unfair emotional toll on DEI leaders through entrenched systems of inequity. Our study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What structures do institutions create to mitigate emotional labor and its adverse impact on DEI leaders, and how do those structures reduce emotional burdens of DEI leaders?
2. What practices do institutions promote to mitigate emotional labor and its adverse impact on DEI leaders, and how do those practices reduce emotional burdens of DEI leaders?

By answering these questions, our study helps institutions foster more supportive, equitable, and sustainable environments for DEI leaders, ultimately strengthening DEI efforts to be more impactful and transformative.

Literature Review on Emotional Labor

Hochschild (1983) first coined the term *emotional labor* in her groundbreaking work on the emotional burden on service workers, such as flight attendants. She describes emotional labor as the emotional aspects of service work where a role involves making others feel emotionally affirmed and supported. It involves regulating one's own emotions to align with organizational or job-specific expectations, which can sometimes result in feelings of emotional dissonance or alienation (Hochschild, 1983). Since then, emotional labor has been conceptualized and understood in other service-related professions such as education, social work, and healthcare. The experience of emotional labor has received attention from social science scholars due to concerns that service workers often felt exhausted by work that requires significant emotional engagement, which becomes a primary reason for leaving the field (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Notably, women and people of color have reported shouldering emotional labor disproportionately in various service careers (Guy & Newman, 2004; Humphrey, 2022; Wingfield, 2021).

In higher education research, *cultural taxation*, a concept related to emotional labor, has been examined. This term describes the labor that faculty and staff of color are expected to perform with little or no reward, given their cultural backgrounds and experiences as members of minoritized groups. *Cultural taxation* is defined as:

> The obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution, but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the service was performed. (Padilla, 1994, p. 26)

Types of cultural taxation include pressure to educate White colleagues while avoiding race talk to make them more comfortable; expectations to serve on committees or task forces related to DEI issues; a lack of acknowledgement for such service; and judgment or censure for speaking out against racism—whereas White faculty or staff who do so are lauded and acknowledged (Arnold et al., 2021; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2022; Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Reddick et al., 2020). While these concepts are closely related, we use the term "emotional labor" to emphasize the emotional aspects of labor in DEI work and recognize that this work places the burdens on People of Color (PoC), Women of Color (WoC), and individuals from all other marginalized backgrounds.

Research on the emotional labor accompanying DEI work in higher education suggests similar inequities. For instance, DEI leaders must navigate daily microaggressions and resistance from individuals hesitant to engage in open dialogue (Evans & Moore, 2015; Jones & Kee, 2021; Miller et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2018). Leaders from historically marginalized groups are expected to serve as experts in DEI issues by virtue of their identity alone and to educate privileged groups using their own deeply personal, emotional traumas and experiences (Anderson, 2020; Miller et al., 2018). Leaders from marginalized backgrounds experience tokenization to represent their identity groups and the university's commitment to DEI (Miller et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2018). Even as they assume additional roles and responsibilities, such as supporting students and their communities who share their identities, they are neither adequately compensated nor acknowledged, and at times, they are dismissed (Bellas, 1999; Hanasono et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019). This emotional labor can lead to feelings of

anger, distrust, frustration, fear, alienation, fatigue, burnout, and depression (Anderson, 2020; Kezar et al., 2018; Lerma et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2018).

DEI leaders have developed several coping mechanisms to alleviate the adverse impacts of emotional labor. Two particularly salient strategies are disengagement and seeking validation (Evans & Moore, 2015, Guillaume & Apodaca, 2022, Miller et al., 2018). Disengagement involves a conscious decision to distance oneself from DEI issues and learning to decline additional responsibilities. The other strategy involves seeking support and validation for their feelings from others to foster a sense of belonging.

While individual DEI leaders have developed coping mechanisms, some scholars suggest that institutions should bear the responsibility for mitigating the emotional burden. Anderson (2020) proposed the notion of "burning through," describing it as a reorientation of "burnout as an institutional problem rather than an individual one" (p. 10). To address burnout associated with emotional labor, institutional leaders should scrutinize the structures, policies, practices, and cultures that may impose emotional burdens on DEI workers, such as improving staffing and compensation for DEI tasks, equitably delegating responsibilities, and adopting a more collaborative approach (Anderson, 2020).

In line with Anderson's (2020) concept of "burning through," we emphasize an institutional approach where campuses proactively establish structures and promote practices that reduce the emotional burden. It is well-documented that many leaders engaging in DEI work, especially those from historically marginalized groups, shoulder the weight of emotional labor. However, the ways institutions assume responsibility for mitigating emotional labor and its adverse effects on DEI leaders remain underexplored. This study seeks to bridge that gap.

Evolution of DEI Roles and Emotional Labor

DEI work has traditionally been conducted in three primary approaches: cultural centers, top-down change through chief diversity officers (CDOs), and cross-campus DEI committees. These three approaches are not mutually exclusive, and campuses may deploy several of these simultaneously. While these three areas represent primary examples of how DEI work has been traditionally organized, it is important to note that they are not exhaustive. Other higher education leaders, including faculty and staff, often informally take on DEI roles outside these common areas. For instance, faculty members may engage in DEI work through curriculum development and mentoring, while administrative staff might advocate for inclusive policies within their departments. By providing background of the way DEI efforts has evolved and been organized, we set the foundation for understanding how emotional labor can be alleviated within a shared equity leadership approach (Holcombe et al., 2023), where workers from not only these three areas, but also across the entire campus are involved in the work. Ahmed (2010) notes the tokenization of DEI leaders and the particular challenges for women and leaders of color who typically undertake this work. As more individuals join these efforts, they build upon the foundation laid by these dedicated pioneers.

Cultural Centers

Cultural centers began emerging on college campuses in the late 1960s as a result of protests by racially minoritized students (Kendi, 2012). Surrounded by mass social movements that called out racist social structures and beliefs, racially minoritized students turned their attention to the discrimination and isolation they faced daily on their campuses. Cultural centers tend to be located within a division of student affairs and are typically led by entry-level or ground-level staff or in some instances midlevel staff (L. D. Patton, 2010). These centers offer a variety of services for students including mentorship, leadership development, retention programming, cultural education, and ethnic studies courses (L. D. Patton, 2010). Cultural centers may serve specific populations (e.g., Black cultural centers, Asian American cultural centers, etc.) or the broader population of diverse students (e.g., multicultural centers, cross-cultural centers). Emotional labor has always been evident in these centers as the staff help students contend with racism and institutional forms of oppression (L. D. Patton, 2010). As a result of their location within the campus organizational structure, cultural centers are often compartmentalized with limited collaboration or influence on other departments and divisions (Clauson & McKnight, 2018; L. D. Patton, 2010). The frequently marginalized position of cultural centers is also evident in the level of university support, which often provides minimal resources for staffing.

Chief Diversity Officers/Offices

The CDO is an attempt to incorporate DEI vertically, or from the top down. Scholars noted the emergence of executive-level diversity leadership in the 1970s alongside the growing representation of racially minoritized students (Peterson et al., 1978), but the trend in higher education to hire CDOs took off in the early 2000s and has since continued (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Reasons for the emergence of CDOs include racial conflict on college campuses, advancing strategic diversity plans, and improving campus climate (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013). CDOs can vary in terms of staffing from having just a few people reporting to them to having a large number of staff and liaisons across campus (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013). CDOs sometimes engage in less emotional labor compared to employees of cultural

centers, given their less direct service role. However, they may have support staff members who perform direct service work (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Despite their less service-oriented role, CDOs can experience tremendous emotional labor, having to shepherd diversity efforts and being tasked with overall cultural transformation, with limited support, authority, and agency (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013).

Committees, Commissions, and Taskforces

Diversity committees, commissions, and task forces are common practices that bring together staff, faculty, administrators, and students to generally advise on DEI-related issues (Williams, 2013). Diversity committees may convene a critical mass of diversity champions and promote strategic DEI planning that is integrated sustainably and for the long term, which can shift institutional actions from reactive to proactive and, over time, lead to DEI-informed standard operating procedures. Committee members bring both a depth of institutional knowledge and innovative ideas to ensure DEI work is relevant to current times and attentive to institutional context (Leon & Williams, 2016; LePeau et al., 2019). When positioned as ad hoc and without authority, diversity committees may find themselves siloed and cut off or disempowered from effecting change in their respective departments. Relatedly, committee proposals for policy and practice may be ignored by departments across campus, and committees generally lack the authority to ensure accountability. Committees may be relegated to an advisory capacity with little support or resources from senior leaders or colleagues (Singletary et al., 2021). Diversity committees may engage in emotional labor as they bring together various individuals who are champions for diversity and have more direct interaction with students (LePeau et al., 2019).

Although different roles and positions of DEI workers required varying types and levels of emotional labor, all DEI workers have often lacked the authority to enact cultural transformation despite being tasked with this responsibility. This lack of authority and connection can incur significant emotional burdens. This study addresses how institutions can alleviate emotional burdens by addressing the lack of and the disconnection from the authority to make changes, particularly through the investigation of campuses that enact a shared equity leadership approach. Building upon the historical base of DEI workers, more people are currently being brought into DEI work through this shared approach. As we investigate the emotional labor that accompanies DEI work in the current context, it is crucial to recognize this history, including the tokenization of many who have undertaken these efforts, and the significant burdens that these early workers have carried.

Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the experience of DEI leaders with emotional labor, and institutional roles in mitigating it, we draw on Ahmed's (2010) analysis of diversity work in higher education institutions and Zembylas's (2015) concept of critical emotional praxis. We chose to use both as theoretical frameworks for this study because both scholars articulate the responsibilities of institutional or social systems in causing emotional harm to individuals living in the systems. This perspective on institutional responsibility is foundational to our study and provides the rationale for exploring institutional strategies to mitigate emotional labor in DEI work.

Ahmed (2010) likens the labor of diversity work to "banging your head against a brick wall" (p. 175). This metaphor suggests that diversity work requires challenging institutional immobility symbolized by the "brick wall." This wall represents

> the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions. (p. 175)

Diversity workers, especially those from marginalized identities, persistently encounter the emotional and physical labor of challenging this barrier to transform an institution, often without understanding from privileged individuals unaware of the barrier's existence. They realize how injustice has permeated across different institutional spaces and should repeatedly challenge the institutional norms creating inequitable conditions. Ahmed's insights explain how the transformative work of dismantling institutional systems of inequity involves unavoidable, inherent emotional burdens, especially for PoC, WoC, and individuals from all marginalized backgrounds. In this study, we examine institutional approaches to make this invisible wall visible to the entire campus community, thereby reducing the emotional labor of convincing others of the wall's existence.

Emotions evoked in diversity work, such as anger, grief, hatred, or hopelessness, should not be regarded only as personal. Instead, these emotions should be recognized as the effects of both individual and collective experiences or trauma, fundamentally caused by systems of oppression in the past and present (Ahmed 2013; Zembylas, 2015). Ahmed (2013) argues, "When emotions are seen as only personal, or about the person and how they feel, then the systematic nature . . . is concealed" (p. 198). Similarly, Zembylas (2015) states, "When trauma is understood as a medical illness, we fail to address basic issues of power and social conflict, which have brought about the traumatic experiences in the first place" (p. 32). These emotional pains are inseparable from historical and contemporary social and institutional injustices and resistance to change. Understanding that

individuals' emotional pains are intertwined with systemic injustices clarifies that institutions bear the responsibility for addressing and reconciling these harms. (Zembylas, 2015). Ahmed (2013) also states,

> The projects of reconciliation and reparation are . . . about whether those who are the victims of injustice can find a way of living in the nation that feels better through the process of speaking about the past, and through exposing the wounds that get concealed by the "truths" of a certain history. (p. 201)

Creating an environment where individuals enduring emotional labor can express their traumas and receive acknowledgement of their emotional difficulties caused by an institution is a form of institutional reconciliation that promotes individual healing. This study examines institutional approaches to foster such an environment, enabling these individuals to share their emotions, heal, and become empowered.

Emotions are malleable and not fixed, and because of their fluidity, emotions can open a possibility of healing and new constructions of the future (Ahmed, 2013; Zembylas, 2015). Addressing the emotions linked to past experiences and evoked in diversity work, the pedagogical practice of *critical emotional praxis*, as proposed by Zembylas (2015), is useful. In critical emotional praxis, people openly share their stories of emotional challenges or trauma. As others acknowledge individuals' emotional struggles, the healing process can move forward. Individuals then engage in critical reflection on their emotional ties with others and past trauma and the constructions of these ties. It is essential to accept "the emotional remains of past traumatic legacies in schools and in wider society" (p. 42) and "interrogate [our] emotional investments in core beliefs and examine the consequences" (p. 42). Through the process, people collectively reframe the meanings of past traumas—without dismissing unpleasant emotions—in constructive ways, such as rebuilding emotional connections with others based on "empathy, humility, and compassion" (Zembylas, 2015, p. 43); building solidarity based on shared experiences and realities; and supporting those in similar situations. This study seeks to understand how institutions can facilitate critical emotional praxis involving reflective practices and emotional sharing among DEI leaders.

Methods

Case Study Methodology

To address our research questions, we developed a constructivist qualitative multiple-case study involving eight institutions and 107 leaders engaging in DEI work (Stake, 1995, 2006). In terms of our paradigm, we use constructivism to suggest that the world is socially constructed and that the participants' understandings are important insights. Conducted between 2019 and 2021, the study examined campuses that broadly shared or distributed leadership and responsibility for DEI efforts, rather than concentrating them in a few leaders or offices. We chose the case study methodology due to its suitability in understanding the process of distributing DEI leadership and exploring emotional labor within this context. Exploring the issue holistically, over time, and with multiple perspectives and sources, case study can uncover the complexity and nuances involved in emotional labor. The constructivist approach allowed us to gain deeper insights into emotional labor by illuminating how DEI leaders from diverse backgrounds interpreted and made sense of their experiences with emotional labor.

Case Selection

Case selection occurred through a combination of purposive and maximum variation sampling (M. Q. Patton, 2002; Stake, 2006). For purposive sampling, we sought cases that were similar in their progress on DEI goals and shared approach to the DEI work (Stake, 2006). We collaborated with our project advisory board (comprising both practitioners and researchers with expertise in DEI and leadership) and higher education experts at the American Council on Education to identify institutions with strong evidence of advancing a DEI agenda, making notable progress in supporting the success of students from traditionally underserved racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., improved graduation rates, persistence). A second criterion was that their DEI work was intentionally shared and embedded across various campus stakeholders and positions. For maximum variation sampling, we aimed to study campuses with diverse contextual characteristics to see how institutional context might shape shared leadership approaches to DEI differently (M. Q. Patton, 2002). We attempted to identify institutions of distinct types, regions, and populations served (e.g., Minority-Serving Institutions [MSI] and Predominantly White Institutions [PWI]). We began with a list of 23 campuses and narrowed it down to 12 based on these varied characteristics. We then held screening calls with presidents of these 12 institutions, asking questions designed to determine the extent to which DEI responsibility was meaningfully shared or distributed across their institution. From that group of 12 campuses, we selected 8 campuses that fulfilled all our inclusion criteria. Table 1 presents the key characteristics of these institutions.

Data Collection

The study involved two primary data sources: document analysis and interviews. While we initially planned to observe meetings and other events, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting travel restrictions prevented this data collection method. At each campus, we collected dozens of

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Participating Institutions

Campus	Institution Type	Public/Private	Region	MSI Status
Campus A	Baccalaureate/associate's colleges: associate's dominant	Public	West: Pacific	AANAPISI, HSI
Campus B	Doctoral universities: very high research activity	Public	Midwest: East North Central	AANAPISI
Campus C	Baccalaureate colleges: arts and sciences focus	Private	South: South Atlantic	PWI
Campus D	Doctoral universities: high research activity	Public	Northeast: Middle Atlantic	AANAPISI, HSI
Campus E	Associate's colleges: high transfer-mixed traditional/nontraditional	Public	Northeast: Middle Atlantic	HSI
Campus F	Master's colleges and universities: larger programs	Public	South: West South Central	HSI
Campus G	Doctoral universities: very high research activity	Public	West: Mountain	PWI
Campus H	Baccalaureate colleges: diverse fields	Public	Northeast: Middle Atlantic	AANAPISI

Note. We used census-designated regions to categorize campuses by region, Carnegie classifications to designate institutional type, and the MSI Data Project to categorize MSI status. MSI = Minority-Serving Institution; AANAPISI = Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution; HSI = Hispanic-Serving Institution; PWI = Predominantly White Institution.

documents, including strategic plans, reports, summaries of key meetings, presidential communications regarding DEI work, and the like. The material from the document analysis informed detailed case study documents, which served as background for researchers to develop the interview protocol. We worked with a campus liaison at each site, typically a CDO or a chief of staff, to obtain information not publicly available. We corresponded with these liaisons to ensure access to up-to-date records throughout the study.

Interviews were conducted in two phases. Phase 1 took place in the spring and summer of 2020 and focused on shared leadership for DEI work. We engaged with small groups of five to eight leaders at each participating institution for a total of 60 interviews. Phase 2 took place throughout 2021 and delved into specific topics that emerged in Phase 1, including emotional labor and institutional support for DEI leaders involved in emotionally challenging tasks. This phase included follow-up interviews with 16 leaders who participated in the first phase, as well as 47 new leaders interviewed for the first time. In total, we conducted 123 interviews: 60 in Phase 1 and 63 in Phase 2.

Our sampling strategy for interview participants was purposive, targeting DEI leaders (M. Q. Patton, 2002). For this study, we defined DEI leaders as individuals who had responsibility for DEI work, whether faculty, student, staff, community partner, or senior administrator. We posed this definition to campus presidents and liaisons and asked them to identify individuals most central to their DEI initiatives. Some interviewees also recommended additional leaders for us to speak with, leading to a degree of snowball sampling (M. Q. Patton, 2002). See Tables 2 and 3 for a breakdown of interviewee characteristics by roles, leadership levels, and demographics. These tables demonstrate more woman and PoC were involved in this work, which was noted as a trend in the literature review.

Phase 1 interview protocols were developed based on literature about equity-minded leadership and advancement of DEI efforts on campus. As Phase 1 interview data suggested emotional labor as a salient experience of DEI leaders, our Phase 2 interview protocols included specific questions about participants' experiences with emotional labor and what mitigated their emotional burdens. We reviewed the protocols with our advisory board and pilot-tested them with several interviewees across both phases. Before the interview, we sent the protocol to participants for reflection. We had a prepared opening that spoke about how we defined DEI, building rapport by demonstrating our familiarity with their campus and at times sharing our own DEI experiences. Interviews took place over the phone, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded and professionally

TABLE 2
Gender and Racial Demographics of Participants by Roles

	Leader of Color			White Leader			Grand
	Woman	Man	Total	Woman	Man	Total	Total
Administrator	33	14	47	21	16	37	84
Faculty	4	7	11	4	2	6	17
Student	1	2	3	0	0	0	3
Community partners	1	0	1	0	2	2	3
Total	39	23	62	25	20	45	107

TABLE 3
Gender and Racial Demographics of Participants by Leadership Levels

	Leader of Color			White Leader			Grand
	Woman	Man	Total	Woman	Man	Total	total
Ground-level leaders	6	8	14	1	3	4	18
Mid-level leaders	19	10	29	16	8	24	53
Senior-level leaders	13	5	18	8	7	15	33
Community partners	1	0	1	0	2	2	3
Total	39	23	62	25	20	45	107

transcribed. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (Phase 1) and Dedoose (Phase 2), software programs designed for qualitative data management and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began at the very beginning of the study and continued throughout. Our analysis of interview data followed Boyatzis's (1998) thematic approach, incorporating both inductive and deductive coding and analysis. Research team members took notes during interviews and created memos capturing initial impressions immediately after each interview. After several interviews, the researchers compared notes and debriefed to identify emerging themes. In this way, we generated a list of emergent themes inductively before formal coding. In Phase 1, inductive themes included the emotional aspects of DEI work and emotional challenges faced by DEI leaders. Consequently, we created an "emotional labor" code for formal coding. During the initial round of coding using Dedoose, we applied this code to the instances of emotional experiences in the data. We then consulted relevant theoretical and empirical literature, like the works of Ahmed (2010, 2013) and Zembylas (2015), regarding emotional labor and cultural taxation, and institutional responsibilities for alleviating emotional labor, to determine if these concepts aligned with our data. This analysis process of identifying emotional experiences and comparing them with existing literature was repeated during Phase 2. We paid particular attention to the racial and gender identities of the participants during data analysis and when constructing our findings to ensure we centered the voices of PoC or WoC. After analyzing both Phase 1 and Phase 2 data, three themes for mitigating emotional labor emerged, which we detailed in the Findings section.

In order to ensure confidentiality, given the sensitive nature of the data, we have not listed institutional affiliation, direct title, or specific demographic information as we wrote out our findings and when we refer to the participants in the study. We also used aliases when conducting data analysis and when sharing information within the team.

Trustworthiness

We ensured trustworthiness of data through several procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). First, we spoke with diverse individuals on each campus, triangulating various perspectives. Documents also served as a sort of triangulation of our interview data. Second, our advisory board provided input at various stages: campus nominations, criteria, data collection, analysis, and findings. Third, five researchers reviewed the data and confirmed the themes. They conducted separate analyses and convened in several retreats to bring their independent analyses. The team worked to refine themes based on each researcher's input. We revisited the data when there was a lack of consensus to ensure accuracy in the emerging concepts. Finally, we conducted member checks near the end of our data collection with a select group from each campus to confirm we had captured their experiences and to obtain feedback (Stake, 1995).

Reflecting on our own identities and positionalities added another form of trustworthiness to our research (Merriam, 2009). By consciously reflecting upon and discussing how our experiences and biases may influence our interpretations and understandings, we aimed to bring awareness and attention to what might otherwise be overlooked. The authors represent diverse racial and gender identities; come from different professional backgrounds; and advocate for DEI in varying roles and capacities, such as student affairs administration, student activism, university committees, public policy think tank, and research. Ueda identifies as an international Asian cisgender woman and is a doctoral candidate studying leadership for DEI as well as intergroup collaboration and institutional change in higher education. Kezar identifies as a White cisgender woman and is a professor of higher education whose work has focused on systemic inequities. Holcombe identifies as a White cisgender woman and is a researcher studying organizational change and leadership for DEI. Vigil identifies as a first-generation Latina and is a research analyst who studies issues of race, racism, DEI, and organizational leadership. Harper identifies as a Black cisgender man and is currently an assistant professor whose work focuses on issues related to leadership, work/labor, and organizational change in higher education. Our diverse identities, life experiences, research interests, and organizational roles and positions informed how we designed the study and analyzed the findings. We used our different positionalities to ensure that the interpretations made of the data were reflective of the participants and not our personal experiences. Furthermore, we kept ongoing memos and reflections, including an initial reflection, that we shared with each other about our views and perspectives on the topic to help us also provide a check on each other's potential biases.

Findings

Three themes of institutional structures and practices that reduce emotional labor and mitigate its negative impacts emerged from our data. These themes are (a) sharing DEI responsibilities with many leaders, (b) creating spaces for emotions, and (c) role-modeling the desired behaviors to build positive relationships and trust.

Share DEI Responsibilities With Many Leaders

Institutions in our study commonly signaled DEI as an institutional priority by structuring DEI work in ways where many individuals across campus participated in creating change. This approach was effective partly because of

consistent and clear messaging. On each campus, everyone, regardless of their role, identity, or background, was expected to engage in DEI, which diminished the emotional burden of advocating for it. In this equity-minded environment, DEI leaders no longer had to do the labor of making a case about why DEI is important because their colleagues understood the need for the institution to change. Those leaders were less likely to experience rejection in their DEI advocacy efforts. They were also less likely to feel alone by having many like-minded colleagues doing the work together. When DEI was framed as everyone's responsibility and an institutional priority, they felt that a part of emotional labor was significantly reduced.

A leader who identified as a WoC highlighted the difference in her experiences with emotional labor between her previous institutions and her current one, sharing DEI responsibilities with many leaders:

> We are in this together, all of the team. And so, having been a part of these conversations *at other institutions*, the emotional work . . . I knew that there was a lot I would need to get done. I knew that I only had certain allies. I knew that there would be a limit to the understanding of the issues. I knew that other things would take precedence. . . . And so the frustration probably would be higher. . . . *Whereas here*, I don't really have to do that work in that way. And the frustration that I have if we're not getting someplace is a frustration that is shared by many people . . . I trust that my colleagues get it and that we are all working towards the same thing. . . . So I don't feel alone.

Numerous leaders are committed to DEI at her campus because of institutional efforts to prioritize and normalize it. There, she felt less burdened by emotional labor stemming from countering others' ignorance, neglect, or pushback against DEI efforts as well as doing all the demanding work alone or with few allies. While she sometimes felt frustrated, it was not due to institutional inaction or disengagement. Instead, it emerged from the challenges of advancing towards a shared vision—a frustration shared by many others. Consequently, her emotional burden of feeling isolated dissipated.

Another leader, also a WoC, vividly described the relief she felt by sharing the burden rather than working alone.

> Suddenly, I felt like I wasn't even doing that much work. I mean, it was shared. Because now, all the heavy lifting, all the monologuing, all of my internal conversations I was having, I now had actual people to have those conversations with, to play out scenarios and ideas with. And I was able to hear their experiences, and that enhanced my own interpretation and understanding of equity. And through that collaboration and sharing, we also collaboratively share that burden, and it feels so much lighter.

Her experience showed the relief that came from sharing the work, and how it helped her lift her emotional toll. Through conversations and collaborations with like-minded others, she released the burdens that she was carrying internally on her own. This shift was made possible by an institutional initiative to distribute responsibility for advancing DEI.

Institutional efforts to prioritize DEI and distribute responsibility also created an environment where a greater number of individuals, previously unfamiliar with systemic inequity, willingly engaged in DEI issues. Leaders from historically marginalized groups shared that they felt emotionally supported when the dominant groups took the initiative to educate themselves about DEI issues and actively take on DEI-related labor. One leader of color expressed this sentiment: "It's really refreshing when people take it on the liberty of themselves to just educate themselves without expecting their peers of color to educate them about it. That really takes away some of the emotional burden of the work." Another leader of color shared a similar experience, noting, "Seeing our White colleagues sort of step up and say, 'I'm willing to take this on' or . . . 'Let me know when you need to step back' has been really critical." This widespread delegation of DEI responsibilities not only alleviated the emotional burden associated with advocating for DEI, facing resistance, and experiencing isolation, but also diminished the unfair emotional toll taken when individuals from marginalized groups were expected to educate their peers about systemic inequity using their personal traumas and experiences.

While an institutional strategy of sharing DEI responsibilities lessened some emotional burdens, leaders in our study noted that it did not *entirely eliminate the emotional burdens*. Leaders from historically marginalized groups still shouldered disproportionate emotional burdens because DEI work often intertwined with their personal identities and past painful experiences, triggering strong emotions, stress, and burnout. To further alleviate the emotional tolls inherent in DEI work, institutions should do more than merely distributing responsibilities. Creating safe spaces for leaders to share and validate their emotions was another strategy implemented by our study institutions.

Create Spaces for Emotions: Acknowledgment and Validation

All institutions in our study intentionally created spaces for DEI leaders to process their difficult emotions stemming from DEI work. These spaces took various forms. One campus, for example, created spaces where individuals could get together and openly discuss their feelings when a traumatic event, such as hate crimes, occurred within the community. Another campus offered healing circles for students, faculty, and staff to come together and process deeply felt emotions and traumas tied to systemic inequity. Some institutions established identity-based affinity groups, providing safe environments for leaders with shared identities to discuss experiences and issues related to their identity and

community. In some institutions, leadership meetings began with emotional check-ins, allowing team members to share their feelings.

By openly sharing emotions and processing them collectively, DEI leaders could accept their feelings, reflect on why they were feeling the way they were, and think about how they could move forward. They felt emotionally supported when others affirmed their emotional realities or shared similar experiences of emotional labor. This mutual sharing came to cultivate a community offering emotional support, solidarity, and resilience, helping them persist through emotionally challenging situations. One leader, a WoC, illustrated how sharing emotions during her diversity commission's meetings that provided a space for people to discuss the DEI issues they were facing was impactful:

> That's where I've seen these emotions come up front and center because . . . the [diversity commission] is more open-ended. In that open, transparent process where people know that they're not being judged . . . that's where there's a lot of sharing and more intense emotions. . . . It provides an outlet for us to actually work through things so that we can . . . get to the core. . . . Otherwise, that emotional barrier just stays there and it's hard to get past that. It's like when you're angry, it's hard to get to the issue because . . . you don't want to hear what the other person has to say.

By sharing their emotions with others who genuinely listened to them and "work[ed] through" it together in a nonjudgmental manner, they could process challenging emotions, which otherwise could be left to fester and grow, and move forward to address DEI issues.

DEI leaders also expressed that their emotional burdens were alleviated when others validated their emotions, experiences, and perspectives. A faculty member in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field, where his racial identity was underrepresented, described how his affinity group within the field became a space where he could receive validation:

> There's a tight cohort of People of Color. You know, you get out of a meeting and you'll just text somebody and say, "Oh my god, did you see what I just saw?" And it's like, "Yeah, you're not crazy." You know? "I saw exactly what you just saw." And it's just sort of this reinforcement of all of these feelings that you're feeling are real and they're justified. . . . It's confirmation that you're not the crazy person.

Similarly, another leader of color emphasized the importance of providing spaces for DEI leaders to share emotions with others who had similar experiences with emotional labor and feel acknowledged:

> We've also created spaces for people to share that burden, to share the experience of that burden with other people who also have similar kinds of stories with regards to the burden. So . . . we spend a lot of time acknowledging the emotions, the stress, and how difficult this work is. And part of that is just simply to make that work visible and make it clear that it is appreciated.

These leaders felt supported when their colleagues validated, acknowledged, and appreciated their emotions, hard work, and burdens. Such validation is vital for those who face resistance or minimization of the issues they bring up or the pains they endure, which can lead to significant emotional burden, stress, burnout, and serious mental health problems. The spaces dedicated to sharing emotional experiences then became a community that offers continuous support to DEI leaders as highlighted by the same leader:

> [The space] also results in the creation of a community that can provide emotional support. . . . You have all kinds of relationships that are within this community of practice that can provide support to each other. Not only the emotional support, but equally important strategic support. . . . It provides more opportunities to build resilience, and support so that people aren't isolated in that work.

While sharing emotions and processing them together in the safe, nonjudgmental spaces intentionally created on campus, these spaces evolved into communities that provided continuous emotional and strategic support. This community fostered solidarity and resilience and helped them navigate emotionally challenging events and situations. The voices and experiences of these participants underscored the benefits of these emotional-sharing spaces, suggesting the importance of institutions offering such spaces.

Role-Model the Desired Behaviors to Build Positive Relationships and Trust

Although DEI leaders agreed that safe spaces to share their emotions were helpful, many emphasized that it took vulnerability, trust, and relationships to be open about their emotions. Displaying emotion is often seen as inappropriate or unprofessional in higher education workplaces or other professional settings, and discussing emotions might risk rejection, judgment, or misunderstanding (Muchinsky, 2000). Thus, building trust and relationships is crucial for DEI leaders when sharing their personal, emotional experiences. A WoC described how relationships and trust facilitated openness about emotions on her campus:

> They have that level of trust and relationship, where they can really . . . be able to say here's an emotional part of this, and I acknowledge it's emotional, and it matters . . . I think it helps.

Similarly, another WoC described the importance of trust in her relationship with a close colleague, who became one of her closest friends:

> There [was] real trust. . . . Sometimes you need to vent. And she was somebody who I could very much vent with, and vice versa. We'd grumble together, and then we'd be like "okay, now how are we going to fix it?" And that really helps with the emotions . . . the ability to be honest even when it may be an unpopular sentiment helps alleviate that emotional burden.

With the relationships and trust with individuals on campus who could listen without judgment, willingly take on some of their burdens, and collaboratively address challenges, DEI leaders felt they could be more honest and open, which alleviated their emotional burdens.

DEI leaders in all institutions recognized the centrality of such interpersonal connections for successful DEI work and for relieving emotional burdens. To facilitate trust and build relationships, these leaders typically tried to be role models that exemplified the desired behaviors and practices for positive relationship-building and trust. For instance, a WoC stressed the importance of leading by example: "One thing that I always try to do is model . . . across campus . . . the behavior and expectations that even I have in my own staff. . . . It's very important to be an example." Another leader described his intentional effort of creating a safe environment to build trust and relationships by being a role model:

> I am . . . sponsoring . . . the discussion and encouraging engagement. I think that's the best thing I can do to show leadership to my group. . . . I mostly just try to set expectations and . . . show courage and humility and . . . self-accountability, and kind of that vulnerability. . . . I hope at least that's been my strategy of getting people to relax and open up and understand that there's no wrong here, kind of thing.

In the space of having discussions on DEI issues, this leader tried to be the one to initiate relationship- and trust-building. By being open and vulnerable, he signaled that the space was safe for everyone to freely share their experiences and perspectives without fear of judgments.

To support these DEI leaders in their relationship-building efforts and promote practices to cultivate relationships and trust within campus communities, one institution in our study developed a framework that set forth behavioral expectations for all staff and faculty. Parts of the framework stipulated that all faculty and staff members, across all organizational levels, should exhibit behaviors to "foster and promote diverse teams" and "collaborate and build inclusive relationships." For the first expectation, the framework explains that everyone should "build trusting relationships with team members through respectful and thoughtful interactions and demonstrate intercultural responsiveness." For the second one, it details that everyone should "generate an atmosphere of collegiality and [be] models of respect, helpfulness, inclusivity and cooperation, creating internal and external networks." Moreover, the framework specifies expected behaviors tailored to different leadership levels, such as team members, team leaders, leaders of multiple teams, and organizational leaders.

This framework was integrated in several ways and places within the institution to encourage everyone to practice these behaviors in their respective roles. Furthermore, the framework was tied to rewards and accountability systems so that the institution incentivized leaders to demonstrate these behaviors. One leader, a WoC, described how DEI leaders used the behavioral expectations:

> We pulled out the specific diversity related expectations [from the entire framework], and really built out what it would look like if we were modeling those behaviors. And we then built . . . the rubric for awareness, practice and then modeling. We also built a self-assessment where one could assess the frequency for which they were demonstrating those behaviors related to diversity, equity, and inclusion [and] identify opportunities for development and/or improvement. They would then be able to share with their mentor or leader to garner the support necessary for acquisition of those skills.

This leader illustrated how the framework provided the infrastructure needed for DEI leaders to effectively model and promote desired behaviors for building trust and relationships. Institutionalizing relationship- and trust-building amplifies individual leaders' efforts and facilitates meaningful relationships broadly across campus, which ultimately increases spaces and opportunities for DEI leaders to safely share their emotional experiences.

Discussion

DEI work requires emotional labor, especially for PoC, WoC, and those from various marginalized backgrounds, leading to stress, burnout, and disengagement (Hochschild, 1983; Pines & Aronson, 1988). In this study, we explored ways to mitigate emotional labor and its adverse impacts on leaders who engage in DEI work within higher education institutions, centering the voices of those marginalized. Whereas previous studies have examined individual coping strategies for emotional challenges of DEI work, we intended to emphasize institutional responsibility and strategies to reduce the emotional burdens experienced by DEI leaders. Our findings showed three promising strategies that institutions can employ to provide emotional support to DEI leaders: (a) sharing DEI responsibilities with many leaders, (b) creating spaces for emotions, and (c) role-modeling the desired behaviors to build positive relationships and trust. We drew on Ahmed's (2010) diversity work and Zembylas's (2015) critical emotional praxis to interpret our findings and suggest directions for future research.

The findings indicate that when there is a large presence of leaders who engage in equity and understand its importance, leaders from historically marginalized groups are relieved of emotional labor. They are less burdened by the constant need to advocate for DEI, confront rejection and resistance, experience isolation, and educate the dominant group on inequities. To expand the number of DEI leaders, institutions should emphasize DEI as an institutional priority across all campus communications. Moreover, DEI responsibility should be distributed across various actors on campus, such as staff, faculty, and administrators. Notably, even though there are current attacks on DEI work and CDOs happening across many states through anti-DEI legislation,

we have found that this approach of distributing DEI responsibilities does not attract similar scrutiny and is more difficult to locate and extricate. Knowing that many campuses are in a challenging DEI environment, it is critical to acknowledge the strength of this approach and a way to maintain this work as priority.

Drawing on Ahmed's (2010) metaphor of the brick wall, our findings suggest that by prioritizing DEI among all employees within institutions, campuses enhance awareness of its significance within the community. This renders the once "invisible wall" *visible* to those who might have not perceived it previously. Consequently, DEI leaders are no longer compelled to keep "banging [their] head against the brick wall," taking on the emotional toll of repeatedly convincing others and encountering rejection in their pursuit of change. Ahmed (2010) depicted the wall as the sedimentation of history. This approach to distributing DEI responsibilities across campus entails the radical potential to deconstruct the deep-seated immovable sedimentation of history within higher education institutions, allowing for the replacement of the institutional foundation with values rooted in interdependence, collaboration, equity, and justice.

The widespread distribution of DEI responsibilities holds significant potential for dismantling entrenched systems of inequity, alleviating *some* emotional burdens on DEI leaders. However, our findings indicate that distributing responsibilities alone cannot fully eliminate the emotional burden caused by another critical factor: the deeply personal nature of DEI work particularly for those with marginalized identities. For leaders from historically marginalized groups, DEI work frequently intertwines with their personal identities and traumatic experiences, invoking significant emotional distress. It is important for leaders to recognize that individuals from marginalized groups will continue to experience this ongoing trauma until the overall society has changed.

Recognizing the institutional responsibility for perpetuating systemic inequities and the resulting unfair emotional labor on leaders from historically marginalized groups, it is critical for institutions to leverage their own resources to provide substantial support that effectively alleviates these emotional burdens. Ahmed (2013) argues that institutional reconciliation involves creating an environment where "victims of injustice can find a way of living in the nation that feels better through the process of speaking about the past and exposing through the wounds" (p. 201). Institutions must proactively establish spaces where individuals burdened by this emotional toll can openly express their emotional difficulties and engage in necessary conversations, which mitigate the emotional burdens caused by DEI work.

Consistent with the perspectives of Ahmed (2013) and Zembylas (2015), DEI leaders in our study emphasized the importance of sharing their emotional struggles with others who can understand and validate their feelings, perspectives, and experiences. By strategically creating spaces helpful to emotional processing, institutions can mitigate the emotional burdens experienced by these leaders. Within these spaces, leaders share their difficult emotional experiences and receive validation and acknowledgement, which facilitates their internal emotional processing and empowers them to tackle the external challenges of systemic inequities. As leaders share their emotions with one another, they also foster a community that continuously offers emotional support, solidarity, and resilience. Given the importance of judgment-free spaces for these leaders to vent out emotions, institutions should allocate resources towards the establishment of such environments. Our study institutions have initiated various spaces, such as healing circles, identity-based affinity groups, open-ended leadership team meetings, and impromptu community gatherings after traumatic events.

Our findings also underscore the significance of cultivating supportive relationships and trust in enabling DEI leaders to comfortably express and share their emotions. DEI leaders emphasized the necessity of such relationships and trust as prerequisites for sharing their emotional struggles. Sharing emotions requires a level of vulnerability and poses risks, such as misunderstanding and judgments, and thus, the foundation of relationships and trust were indispensable. Many leaders in our study made intentional efforts for cultivating positive relationships and trust with colleagues and team members. They commonly tried to be role models, initiating relationship-building by showing openness and vulnerability and creating safe spaces for others to start sharing. Without relationships and trust, it is hard to share emotions. Yet without sharing, it is difficult to build relationships and trust. In essence, relationships and sharing are two sides of the same coin, and DEI leaders with a sense of responsibility play a critical role in courageously *initiating* the process of sharing and relationship building: being a role model.

In addition to individual leaders' efforts, our findings suggest that institutions can more formally promote practices to foster positive relationships and trust. For instance, an institution in our study developed a behavioral framework outlining desired actions and attitudes that facilitates building supportive relationships and trust. This framework was utilized in several ways, such as professional development materials, self-assessment tools, and rewarding systems. By introducing and rewarding these desired behaviors, institutions communicate that everyone is expected to value and engage in relationships and trust-building efforts with colleagues and team members. Such institutional endorsement increases the number of individuals participating in positive relationship-building. By institutionalizing relationships and trust-building and having more members of the community engage in it, the responsibility no longer falls on the shoulders of a handful of individual leaders. Consequently, DEI leaders find more

opportunities for safely expressing their emotions and receiving the emotional support they need.

Implications for Practice

Our findings suggest three important implications for institutional strategies to mitigate emotional labor and its adverse impacts on DEI leaders.

Widely Distribute DEI Responsibilities Across an Institution. First, it is crucial for institutions to establish organizational structures that distribute DEI responsibilities broadly among leaders across various campus departments. Instead of centralizing the responsibility in a single DEI office or assigning it solely to a CDO, it should be integrated into the roles of leaders at different organizational levels, making them accountable for contributions to the DEI agenda. This approach ensures that a larger number of leaders both understand and actively engage in DEI work, thus lessening the emotional burden associated with advocating for DEI and confronting resistance. Moreover, it helps alleviate the disproportionate burden often shouldered by historically marginalized staff, faculty, and administrators, who are otherwise expected to educate dominant groups through their own personal experiences and traumas. By having more people from the dominant group take the initiative to educate themselves and actively participate in DEI-related tasks, the emotional toll on leaders from the marginalized groups is mitigated. Overall, distributing DEI responsibilities across a wide array of campus leaders fosters an environment where equity becomes both the norm and a shared responsibility, significantly reducing the emotional strain that otherwise falls on individual DEI leaders.

Intentionally Create Nonjudgmental Spaces to Discuss Emotions. Second, institutions should intentionally create nonjudgmental spaces where DEI leaders can safely share their difficult emotions without fear of judgment. Institutions can identify DEI leaders who inevitably engage in emotionally taxing activities—such as facilitating difficult conversations, advising and listening to those traumatized, sharing their personal stories to increase awareness, or convincing others to participate in DEI initiatives—and provide dedicated spaces and emotional support to these leaders. Institutions in our study offered safe spaces for discussing emotions in several ways, such as healing circles, affinity groups, impromptu gatherings after a traumatic event, and open-ended conversations during regular team meetings. While creating such spaces, it is important for institutions to recognize the potential risks inherent in sharing emotions and being vulnerable that could inadvertently cause harm. To reduce the risks of causing further harm, it is crucial to validate and acknowledge the feelings and experiences being shared, even if they might be considered "unpopular sentiments," as noted by a DEI leader in our study.

Set Expectations for Behaviors to Promote Positive Relationships and Trust. Third, institutions should set expectations for behaviors that cultivate positive relationships and trust among colleagues and team members. Building supportive relationships and trust is crucial for DEI leaders to share their emotions openly and navigate the emotional complexities inherent in their roles. While individual efforts to demonstrate desired behaviors and be role models are impactful, institutional approaches to establish and promote expected behaviors can significantly augment these efforts. Institutions should develop and integrate behavioral frameworks that outline and incentivize actions promoting supportive relationships and trust. In our study, an institution integrated a behavioral framework into various organizational structures and practices, such as professional development materials, self-assessment tools, and accountability and reward systems. Institutionalizing these behaviors can facilitate the creation of a more supportive and inclusive DEI work environment, reduce the pressure on individual leaders to initiate relationship-building, and provide more opportunities for open dialogue and emotional support across campus. And focusing on relationships and trust also ensures that this work does not become a checklist of activities and transactional but instead ensures that it stays focused on transformation and new ways of being or showing up on campus.

Future Research

Our research is among the early studies focusing on institutional roles in addressing the emotional labor accompanying DEI work in higher education. More research is needed to better understand emotional labor in the DEI context and institutional ways to address it effectively. In this section, we offer some topics for future research that emerged from our study to advance this area of research.

First, as we have noted previously, our study identified that one institution implemented a behavioral framework to facilitate relationship- and trust-building among campus communities, which seems a promising strategy but is still underexplored. Future research could delve deeper into how the application of such a framework contributes to the relationship- and trust-building among DEI leaders and how it fosters an inclusive campus culture that is more supportive for DEI initiatives and DEI leaders' emotional well-being. Research could also examine the barriers and challenges in implementing the framework or having it impact individual behaviors and campus climate. This research should also be conducted in institutions with varying characteristics and contexts, which would inform distinct types of institutions on how they could integrate similar strategies effectively in their own unique institutional contexts.

Second, this study highlighted the importance of institutions providing safe spaces for DEI leaders to share emotions and receive validation from others but did not closely

examine the sharing process that helped them release their emotional burdens. Future research can delve deeper into DEI leaders' experiences of sharing emotions with others and examine how this helps reduce their emotional pain or stress. Zembylas's (2015) critical emotional praxis offers valuable insights into this sharing process, suggesting that sharing difficult emotions helps individuals reflect on their emotional relationships with others and past events and rearticulate the meanings of past trauma in constructive ways. Consistent with this concept of critical emotional praxis, leaders in our study constructed community, solidarity, and resilience or deepened understanding of their own identities or social issues through sharing emotions. However, we did not have sufficient evidence to illuminate participants' internal process of reflecting and reconstructing the meaning of the past, as understanding the internal or emotional processes of DEI leaders was not our study's primary focus. Future research focusing on how the leaders experience the internal process of reconfiguring the meaning of their emotional labor, through the lens of critical emotional praxis, would be beneficial. A deeper understanding of this process can provide institutions with guidance on how to effectively facilitate leaders to process difficult emotions associated with DEI work, beyond simply creating safe and nonjudgmental spaces for emotions.

Third, future research needs to further explore the issue of vulnerability associated with sharing difficult emotions inherent in DEI work. Our findings indicate that DEI leaders require trusting relationships to feel comfortable being vulnerable and openly sharing their emotions, suggesting that facilitating supportive relationships is a possible strategy to mitigate the concerns about vulnerability. However, there are more things to consider regarding vulnerability. For instance, some participants in our study appreciated the space to express emotions but hesitated to share when the group had many individuals from dominant groups or higher-level leadership. Thus, it is vital to carefully consider who occupies these spaces and whether group dynamics might cause discomfort or perceived threat. Creating identity-based affinity groups, as observed in our study, is one approach to address this concern. Although it is challenging to ensure a comfortable environment for everyone, institutions should strive to maximize safety and comfort for leaders sharing their emotions. Future research should explore strategies to ensure that DEI leaders of diverse identities feel truly safe and comfortable sharing their emotions.

There is another aspect of vulnerability that warrants future examination, that is, vulnerability in confronting and processing difficult emotions and related past (traumatic) events. Zembylas (2015) cautions that navigating difficult emotions is inherently discomforting, demanding significant vulnerability and entailing a risk of further distress. This process is time-consuming, and individuals may experience it differently (Zembylas, 2015). Given the delicate nature of emotions, it is important to consult the psychological literature, including fields like psychiatry and psychotherapy, and collaborate with scholars in these fields to delve deeper into this aspect of vulnerability. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, future research should investigate ways to assist DEI leaders in safely and surely processing difficult emotions and experiences and determine the types of institutional support required for this process.

Another key area for future research is exploring the ripple effects of these strategies beyond the immediate circle of DEI leaders, such as their impact on student experiences and broader campus culture, which could further demonstrate their extensive benefits. Our study did not explore these broader ripple effects, but this could also add additional evidence in terms of supporting a better educational environment and for the value of sharing emotional labor.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions bear responsibility for addressing the emotional labor of DEI leaders, especially those from historically marginalized groups, who disproportionately shoulder the burden. Institutions should leverage their resources to support these leaders engaging in the emotionally taxing labor of transforming the entrenched systems of inequities that institutions have long dismissed. Our study demonstrates that intentional efforts made by institutions can indeed alleviate the emotional burden shouldered by DEI leaders. The effective institutional strategies we identified included the widespread distribution of DEI responsibilities, the creation of safe and nonjudgmental spaces dedicated to discussing and acknowledging emotions, and the role-modeling of desired behaviors for positive relationship- and trust-building. By implementing these strategies, institutions can reduce emotional labor and create more supportive, equitable, and sustainable environments for all DEI leaders.

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