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**EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND MOTIVATIONS OF WOMEN  
WHO LEAD AND ENGAGE IN CHANGE WORK AT THEIR HOME  
INSTITUTION**

Maria Muccio-Raposo

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND MOTIVATIONS OF WOMEN WHO  
LEAD AND ENGAGE IN CHANGE WORK AT THEIR HOME INSTITUTION

BY

MARIA MUCCIO-RAPOSO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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IN

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2022

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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## **ABSTRACT**

Higher education has the power to facilitate social and economic mobility, as well as academic and personal growth for individuals, families, and communities. The problem is not located in the potential of institutions, but rather in some of the economic and social forces that influence the operations and actions in higher education, such as Academic Capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 1997) and neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 2006; Giroux, 2002). This study sought to understand the forces at play that draw institutions away from the free thinking and transformative power of higher education and how participants recognize and respond to systemic issues in higher education. A qualitative phenomenological research design (Smith et al., 2009) was used to explore the lived experiences of professional staff who identify as women and how they arrive at and engage in change work to support students across campus.

This project was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do participants make sense of their experiences of change work in higher education? and (2) In what ways do participants describe their efforts to persist in their attempts to influence change? The findings of this study suggest that the common experiences of change work include relational work, emotional labor, pressures of evaluation and relevance and experiences of both empowerment and disempowerment. The strategies of survival described by participants in this study centered on personal agency and building partnerships across the institution and with external partners.

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Lastly, to my husband – thank you for helping me get through this, for always believing in me, and for always being there to make me laugh!

## **DEDICATION**

*In Loving Memory of  
Fatima Diaraye Diallo*

*We all continue to smile as we remember your words of wisdom, your love for life, and  
your passion for education and teaching.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Our own efforts to transform institutions can be used by institutions as evidence that they have been transformed. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 103)*

#### **Journey to This Topic**

As a woman working in higher education in some form of middle-management for the past fourteen years, I've often felt that my role in the center is defined by trying to balance the people and priorities that exist on either end. On one end are the stated priorities of institutions, their state and federal governing bodies, and funding agencies. On the other end is what I think takes priority and matters most to students and our team, who are the ones that are 'on the ground' and engaged in the everyday work with students. As an institution that is part of the larger social structure of society, change feels slow, and it always seems connected to explanations of limited resources of money, people, and space - as well as the default saying of "it's just how things are done here." The problem with "it's just how things are done here" is that these everyday policies, practices, decisions of whom to hire, what deserves funding, and how to allocate physical space, are where structural inequities (racism, classism, sexism, ableism) live and breed. The structural inequities in higher education are the persisting and unjust distribution of power, resources, rights, services, property, and access in U.S. society that are sustained by the dominant ideology.

One of the ways that staff can push back against these institutional norms and influence change that disrupts and uncovers the maintenance of structural inequities is to

take on unassigned leadership and advocacy roles to call attention to campus issues and to support students. My experiences in higher education led me to want to understand why and how women take on these roles. I found my direction for this study in Ahmed's (2012) work with individuals whom she names as diversity practitioners in higher education. She describes how injustices in higher education are often "passed over as routine or ordinary features of institutional life" (p. 22), and the ways that practitioners experience and respond to these deeply embedded practices of exclusion within an institution. To that end, this study sought to honor the expertise of women who engage in change work and their perceptions of higher education, as well as how they describe their engagement in influencing change.

The feminist lens of this study views women's experiences and perceptions as a legitimate form of knowledge that uncovers the meaning of a social experience (Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 2015). Further, both change work and feminist work in this study recognize that race, class, and gender matter in how women experience the dual nature of supporting and resisting an institution at the same time. I believe the work of women in higher education who are leading change is valuable to the institution, students, and the community and so it was my goal to name and uplift the value of their work through this study.

### **Justification for Study**

Higher education has the power to facilitate social and economic mobility, as well as academic and personal growth for individuals, families, and communities. The problem is not located in the potential of institutions, but rather in some of the contradictions that do not fulfill this promise and exist in the day-to-day operations,

decisions, and actions within higher education. On one end, the dominant narrative for a number of institutions of higher education center on crisis management and the discourses of limited resources, disinvestment in public education, the need for cost saving measures, the restructuring of departments, and the decisions to eliminate certain programs (Selingo, 2015). This narrative calls on faculty and staff to support the “crisis” and is described in the literature on neoliberalism and higher education as the expectation to do more with less by means “of an endless drive to do more, publish more, teach more, apply more often for funding, all in a shorter period of time” (Cole & Heinecke, 2020, p. 100). A competing narrative describes college campuses as part of the larger social structure of society, and as such, their role in maintaining and reproducing structural inequities, which are based on the systematic disadvantages experienced by marginalized populations (Acker, 2006; Stephens et al., 2012). This study calls attention to the ways in which staff acknowledge and respond to the institutional issues and challenges of this competing narrative by highlighting their experiences and perceptions of influencing change and inspiring others to join them.

The “public good” model of higher education (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008, p. 87) recognizes structural inequities and aims to improve the campus experience for students through collaborative relationships and services that center community and inclusiveness. In theory, an institution that is fully committed to a public good model is one that supports “individuals, paradigms, and spaces to enact social change and fuel social activism” (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008, p. 87). Patel (2015) further argues that even though statements from the university speak to diversity and social justice, it is the actual actions of the institution that maintain inequities. While conversations, committee

meetings, and planning documents center around diversity and inclusion in higher education may be happening, the actions are lacking (Ahmed, 2012). The strategies associated with change work are further theorized because of and in response to “a blockage in the system” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102). These blockages act as systemic barriers to the flow of change work within an institution.

The aim of this study is to understand how professional staff recognize and respond to persisting structural inequities in higher education in their efforts to improve the campus experience for marginalized students, including students of color, first generation students, and/or students who identify as low-income. For the purpose of this research, these unassigned leadership and advocacy roles will be referred to as change work. I define the concept of change work as the efforts by faculty and staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities.

The work associated with contesting the structural inequities created by a neoliberal model of higher education is often characterized in the literature as emotional labor. Emotional labor consists of activities such as mentoring, advising, excessive committee participation, and relational work in higher education (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). Research suggests that it is women in higher education, and more specifically women of color (Evans & Moore, 2015; Miller et al., 2019), who are more likely to engage in emotional labor and care work at their institution in their efforts to support, mentor, and develop meaningful relationships with students (Goerisch, 2019). This work is done with minimal resources and offers little opportunity for pay increases. Goerisch writes, “[These] intersectional performances of emotional

labor, especially in these precarious times of higher education, are surprisingly under-theorized” (Goerisch, 2019, p. 127). In fact, studies have shown that emotional labor is often devalued and rendered invisible to the institution, even though there is an unwritten expectation for women, and mostly women of color, to engage in this work (Goerisch, 2019; Miller et al., 2019), which can inevitably lead to high burnout rates. Burke (2020) connects the ways in which emotional labor is compounded by neoliberal thought through the ways it reinforces patriarchal norms of rationality and linearity and renders women’s work as invisible. The lack of understanding and recognition surrounding women’s efforts in higher education to improve the campus experience for students means there is no general understanding of why these women engage in this work; how these women come to understand the social issues that impact students; and how they make meaning of their roles and relationships to students and the institutions.

### **Purpose of this Study**

In this qualitative phenomenological research, I sought to find out more about the forces at play that draw institutions away from the free thinking and transformative power of higher education. My purpose was to understand the lived experiences of staff who identify as women and how they arrive at, engage in, and navigate through their participation in change work to support students on their college campuses. I highlight the experience of women who do not hold executive leadership positions to understand the ways in which participants take on unassigned leadership behaviors and strategies. Executive leadership is defined as individuals in higher education who hold titles such as President, Provost, Chief Academic Officer, Vice President, Associate/Assistant Vice President, and/or Dean (Kezar & Lester, 2011). This study is grounded in the belief that

everyone who works in higher education can take on a leadership role to transform the institution, regardless of title (Astin & Astin, 2000). I focus on women to address the under-theorizing of women's work in higher education (Goerisch, 2019) and to understand how participants make meaning of their relationship with both the institution and students. This research explores the ways that women address persistent systemic issues on college campuses; sheds light on the connection between their work and the social and political environment of higher education; and describes how participants balance their professional work and their own well-being. This study addresses a gap in the literature on emotional labor that has predominantly focused on faculty efforts (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). Staff are often overlooked in the discussion of how neoliberalism impacts the experience of working in higher education (Kezar et al., 2019). It is staff who most often feel the impact of cost saving measures because they are expected to take on higher workloads and do more for students, with fewer resources.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were developed to guide this phenomenological study and to come to an understanding of how women in higher education experience the process of influencing change.

- 1.) How do participants make sense of their experiences of change work in higher education?
- 2.) In what ways do participants describe their efforts to persist in their attempts to influence change?

I followed the phenomenological practice of data collection by conducting semi-structured interviews with six participants (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were 60-minutes in length, conducted via Zoom, and consisted of open-ended questions that allowed for participants to take part in leading the conversation (Smith et al., 2009). The Zoom platform was equipped with the option to transcribe the audio of the interviews. I verified the accuracy of all transcriptions provided by Zoom and sent the final transcript to participants to engage in member checking. On all participant transcripts I made notes in the margins of initial codes and highlighted quotes and words that appeared most significant and interesting. My data analysis process was centered on the hermeneutic circle and required me to consistently revisit the literature, my initial coding document, and the reflections in my research journal (Laverty, 2003).

### **Definition of Terms and Concepts**

This study focused on how participants experience their process of engaging in change work and, specifically, how they perceive the campus environment and the strategies they use to influence change. The following terms in this section apply to this research study.

#### ***Neoliberalism and Academic Capitalism***

The terms neoliberalism and academic capitalism will be used throughout this study to describe how ideologies of commodification, privatization, and individualism have shown up in higher education and how these ideologies permeate the hierarchy, policies, interactions, and the overall culture of higher education. Neoliberalism gained momentum in the 1980s under the Reagan administration and has since been defined as the political and economic practices which “propose that human well-being can best be

advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade (D. Harvey, 2006, p. 145). Neoliberalism as a political force intersects with both institutional racism and patriarchy and perpetuates the false idea that society and institutions are both gender neutral and not organized or influenced by race and class (Burke, 2020). The theory of academic capitalism captures the ways in which neoliberal ideology has situated a business model, markets, and market-like behavior in the context of higher education (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

### ***Public Good Knowledge Regime***

The “public good knowledge regime” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) characterizes the inspiration and potential of higher education. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) characterize IHEs as shifting away from the public good model and attribute this to the rise of academic capitalism. The aim of the public good model upholds the practice of skepticism and the academic freedom associated with discovering new knowledge as a communal practice that serves to benefit society and communities (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In theory, an institution that is fully committed to a public good model is one that supports “individuals, paradigms, and spaces to enact social change and fuel social activism” (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008, p. 87). This study sought to understand the stories, experiences, and perceptions of how participants use their personal and political power to advance a public good model in higher education.

### ***Tempered Radicals***

One of the ways that professional staff engage in influencing change and maintaining the public good model of education is supported by the theory of tempered

radicals. The term “tempered radical” originated with Meyerson and Scully (1995) and is defined as individuals who do not have formal authority but are able to work within a system to push against institutional norms in strategic ways by building community, engaging in collective action, and challenging people and systems to re-think widely accepted practices. Tempered radicals often have an agenda, identity, and/or values that conflict with institutional norms. Their commitment to authenticity is essential to their character and so they will not compromise their values in the name of conformity (Meyerson, 2008).

Meyerson (2008) characterized tempered radicals as individuals who are skilled in rocking the boat and staying in the boat at the same time. This study draws on the theory of tempered radicalism because it centers the experience of organizational insiders and the ways in which insiders can navigate and influence change. In Kezar and Lester’s (2011) application of the tempered radical framework in higher education, being tempered often becomes a tool for survival and a way for faculty and staff to balance their approach. The use of the tempered radical framework is similarly applied in Alston’s (2005) study of how Black female superintendents worked both within and against the system: “these women are radical in their ideals but tempered in the fact that they work in the confines of organization” (p. 677). In Alston and McClellan’s (2011) book, *Herstories: Leading with the Lessons of the Lives of Black Women Activists*, the experience of tempered radicals is further theorized and described as having been “tempered by time and experience, refined by the challenges, people, policies, and politics that they have to face” (p. 140). Tempered radicals have both an understanding of the politics and culture of their institution, and experience navigating the politics and

culture of their institution. This uniquely positions them as insiders who can navigate the politics, policies, and unwritten rules of their institution. Their everyday experiences are at the foundation of how these women come to understand their role and relationship to the institution and how they work to uphold the public good model of higher education.

### **Summary and Organization of this Research**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one provided an overview of the justification for this study, key terms, and the research questions which will guide this project. Chapter two presents the theories of academic capitalism and tempered radicalism and the supporting literature on performance work and emotional labor. Chapter three describes the methodology and research design and the procedures used to conduct this study. Chapter four details the findings of this study as it relates to the research questions presented in chapter one and the literature discussed in chapter two. Lastly, chapter five discusses how this study contributes to the literature, its implication for policy, and further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

This study sought to understand the experience of women in higher education who engage in change work and are committed to seeing their institutions become more equitable and inclusive spaces for students. The conceptual framework and literature review of this chapter attempt to connect how the current and historical context of higher education has led to the need for staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that counteract the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities. To situate this study in the literature, previous studies that explore the influence and permanence of emotional labor and performance work in higher education are also discussed.

The definition of change work for this project was centered on the ways in which participants acknowledge and respond to how IHEs maintain structural inequities. In this study, structural inequities are defined as the persisting and unjust distribution of power, resources, rights, services, property, and access in U.S. society that are sustained by the permanence of neoliberal ideology. This unjust distribution is based upon the historical oppressions and experiences of dispossession faced by marginalized groups in society, as compared to the privileges afforded to middle-to-upper class, white, and college educated populations (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). The maintenance of structural inequities in higher education is supported by “inequality regimes” in organizations, which is the

“interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities.” (Acker, 2006, p. 443). While structural inequities are defined as the unjust distribution of power and rights, the concept of inequality regimes helps to describe how structural inequities are embedded and maintained in institutions. This study connects the concept of inequality regimes to two of the ways that structural inequities are maintained and reproduced in higher education: (1) through the influence of neoliberalism and the academic capitalism model and (2) through the discourse of meritocracy and acceptance of meritocratic thinking (Alvarado, 2010). Both concepts maintain structural inequities by influencing how higher education views the student experience; reduces diversity, equity, and inclusion work to performance work (Ahmed, 2012); and invalidates a public and social responsibility to address the systematic arrangements of power (Lipman, 2006) created by an inequality regime.

### **Tracing Structural Inequities and Meritocratic Thinking in Higher Education**

The maintenance of structural inequities can be understood through looking at the historical and sociopolitical context of higher education. Historically, the concept of the American university was founded in both whiteness and elitism and, although it was not an explicitly stated policy at the time, the purpose and function of the university was to train and elevate the status of white men so that they could serve as leaders to the state, the church, and other elite professions (Hale, 2008). Essentially, white men were able to preserve their power through maintaining exclusive access to the cultural and social capital in society provided by higher education, which is inevitably tied to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1989). This process of exclusion to forms of cultural and social capital provided by higher education is the foundation of many of the existing structural

inequities present in higher education. That is, structural inequities in IHEs are the byproduct of historical exclusion from the social, cultural, and economic capital that is provided by a higher education.

Hale (2008) explained that, as access to higher education expanded, this increased access also began to contend with the interest of the white upper-class because they no longer maintained full property rights to the university and the associated cultural, social, and economic capital that is linked to this access. So, while access to higher education has expanded, the ideological beliefs of how to access and succeed in higher education is reminiscent of the classist and racist origins of higher education (Hale, 2008). Specifically, these ideological beliefs manifest themselves through the narrative of meritocracy and how access and opportunity is realized in higher education.

Bettache et al. (2020) connect the history of exclusion to neoliberal influence and claim that economic freedom and meritocracy are two defining features of neoliberalism. When meritocracy is aligned to neoliberal thought, it cultivates an indifference to persisting structural inequities in higher education because of the belief that social and economic disadvantages are the result of not being resourceful, hardworking, and competitive (Alvarado, 2010; Bettache et al., 2020). Meritocracy is centered on the false optimism that “individuals get out of the system what they put into it” (Alvarado, 2010, p. 17) and assumes that individuals achieve, advance, and succeed relative to the amount of work and time they invest in a particular goal, as opposed to a social system that is built upon sustaining structural inequities relative to race, class, and gender (Alvarado, 2010). When individuals internalize the values of a meritocratic system, they assume the barrier to personal and community achievement is a personal shortcoming (due to a lack

of a talent or hard work), which ultimately leads to feelings of decreased self-worth (Alvarado, 2010).

Centering meritocracy is damaging to students in higher education because it influences policy, perpetuates colorblindness, and sustains the false narrative that those who have access and resources only achieved this because of their hard work, whereas those who do not have similar access and resources have simply just not worked hard enough (Bernal, 2002). In this sense, meritocracy recasts the effects of power, privilege, classism, and racism and positions disparities in outcomes as the result of individual actions, as opposed to systematic disadvantages. Littler (2013) further argued that meritocracy “functions as an ideological myth to obscure economic and social inequalities and the role it plays in curtailing social equality” (p. 55). Perpetuating the meritocracy myth is one way that colleges and universities sustain systematic disadvantages on their campuses. Participants in this study resist this narrative of meritocracy in their efforts and advocacy to upend the neoliberal assumptions of how students’ access, participate in, and succeed in college. The women in this study build partnerships across the institution and with external partners to push others to re-think how institutions can authentically support students, redistribute resources, and rethink state and local policies.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study connects the theories, assumptions, and concepts that help to explain the ways in which participants experience, describe, and push against the competing narratives of higher education. This section begins with a discussion of these competing narratives present in higher education - the public good

model versus the academic capitalist model. Next, I connect how neoliberalism as a larger societal force perpetuates systemic disadvantages and is the foundation to the theory of academic capitalism, and ultimately how these forces lead to the need for tempered radicals in higher education. The theory of academic capitalism exposes the corporatization of higher education and its impact on faculty and staff, while the theory of tempered radicalism shapes some of the strategies and tactics used by participants to resist the influence of academic capitalism. I also discuss how the influence of neoliberalism flows through federal policy (i.e., Pell Grant) and policy discourse.

### ***Competing Narratives of Higher Education: Public Good vs. Academic Capitalist***

The competing narratives I refer to in this study are framed by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) as the shift “from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime” (p. 28). The public good model of higher education is characterized by academic freedom, community, social change, and organized skepticism (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), all of which serve to advance the community and the social well-being of students. Students benefit by experiencing positive identity development, an increased sense of belonging, and the freedom to question and challenge society (Giroux, 2002). The public good model arguably stands in opposition to the ideological beliefs of academic capitalism, which aligns itself with market-like behaviors and centers corporate-like priorities of innovation, entrepreneurialism, and competition (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

When the ideologies of academic capitalism become embedded in institutions, it disrupts the public good ideals of community and collectivism and instead centers ideals of individualism and competition in the market of education (Kezar et al., 2019). This

means that universities will act and engage in competitive ways to build both institutional reputation and profits, as opposed to finding their direction in the overall advancement of society and communities (Jessop, 2017). These competing narratives are particularly harmful when decisions surrounding students, the offerings of courses, and the funding of programs are undertaken from a capitalist perspective as opposed to a collectivist perspective. Since a capitalist model is always focused on competition and financial benefit at the expense of others, rarely are decisions made from the ideologies of public good model.

I argue that institutions must take intentional steps to uphold the public good model because higher education is “one of the few public spaces left where students can learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacities to make a difference” (Giroux, 2002, p. 450). If higher education is truly meant to be a transformative experience, then the ways in which students experience their campus must match this goal. In this study, the participants who engage in change work do so from a public good model of education, while many of the challenges and obstacles they encounter are connected to the ways in which IHEs embrace neoliberal ideology and academic capitalist culture.

### ***Neoliberalism Connection to Academic Capitalism***

As a mode of capitalism, neoliberalism has dominated the political and social discourse of U.S. society for over forty years, and is centered on deregulation, privatization, and commodification (D. Harvey, 2006). Neoliberalism is foundational to academic capitalism because it operates as the sustaining political, social, and economic

ideology that has infiltrated all the systems (education, legal, healthcare) of U.S. society. As Saunders (2007) argued, the original theorists of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) failed to thoroughly connect the construct of neoliberalism as the “overarching paradigm influencing higher education” (Saunders, 2007, p. 1). The limited discussion of neoliberalism in the seminal literature on academic capitalism leaves a gap in fully understanding how the larger political structures influence the systematic disadvantages that persist in higher education. To that end, the problem is that neoliberalism influences not just economic ideologies, but it also constructs the “common sense” way (Giroux, 2007, p. 11) that society sees the division between the state and social welfare. Neoliberal ideology assumes that the well-being and advancement of individuals is linked to one's ability to engage as an economic actor to achieve progress and advance social mobility, all of which leads to an unequal access to rights, resources and spaces in both society and higher education.

Neoliberal thinking assumes that individuals can access social rights and freedoms by self-optimization and taking individual responsibility (D. Harvey, 2006). The sustaining framework of free markets and individualism created by the neoliberal state locates how members of a society can achieve social, economic, and educational advancement. In terms of educational advancement in this framework, Mintz (2021) explains that the commodification of education means shifting the cost of higher education from the community to the individual and how this shift has led to the stagnant funding of higher education. In this sense, access to a higher education is determined by the ability to pay, as opposed to the ability and desire for educational advancement. This shift in the cost of education from the community to the individual is present in the static

funding of the federal Pell grant over the past 50 years, which will be discussed in the following section.

One of the ways in which neoliberalism perpetuates structural inequities is through a “race-blind framework” (De Lissovoy, 2013, p. 743), which denies that social inequalities are connected to larger societal issues of access and discrimination and instead are the result of individual choices and/or the inability to effectively engage with the economic and social structures of society. Neoliberal ideology assumes that all members of society have access to the same opportunities and positions racism as a problem located only within the mind of a small group of white people, as opposed to an institutional and systemic issue that lives within the structure of U.S. society (Perez & Salter, 2019). This line of reasoning removes responsibility from the state and minimizes racism to a historical issue that society has overcome, except for a “few individual people” (Perez & Salter, 2019, p. 273). When IHEs embrace this type of thinking they render the experiences of students of color as invisible, perpetuate systemic issues of disadvantage and access, and fail to locate meaningful ways to foster a sense of belonging on campus.

To further contextualize how neoliberalism influences higher education and underscores the maintenance of structural inequities, Cole and Heinecke (2020) conducted a qualitative study with college student activists to understand how they resist and critique neoliberalism in higher education. The study provides the defining characteristics of a neoliberal university in what they named as the “social imaginaries of higher education” (Cole & Heinecke, 2020, p. 18), which describe the patterns in the social world and how power, values, and ideals are represented in our interactions. The

findings of their study frame the neoliberal university as a space that: (1) positions students as consumers; (2) is governed by hierarchy and power and is divided into competing units (i.e., academic affairs, student affairs); and (3) sees knowledge as both a commodity and as related to economic goals (Cole & Heinecke, 2020, p. 100). If institutions embrace this view of students as paying customers and knowledge as a commodity, then they are then more likely to engage and interact with students in a transactional way that neglects to intentionally support the academic, social, and personal development of students.

### ***Academic Capitalism***

Academic capitalism was selected as part of the conceptual framework because it explains how IHEs actively participate in the “new economy” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 21) and how administrative focus has shifted to business and corporate-like models, and ultimately, how these practices impact the faculty and staff who directly support students and the institution. The corporatization of higher education is framed by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) in their theory of academic capitalism, that explains how IHEs have responded to the decrease in government funding and have turned to alternative ways of bringing in revenue (Kezar et al., 2019; McClure, 2016). According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), the new economy is based on principles of commodification and privatization that has pushed IHEs into participation in the sphere of free markets. In the context of higher education, participation in the new economy means seeking revenue through patents on research (mostly in STEM); securing private funds through grants and corporate partnerships; and finding ways to be competitive with colleges across the nation to secure higher student enrollments (Slaughter & Rhoades,

1997). This increased profit motive in higher education has led to the reconfiguring and unbundling of faculty and staff work (Kezar et al., 2019) and the increase of administrative positions. Which means that the scale has tipped, and the presence of administration outpaces that of faculty and staff. That matters because previous studies have found that generally it is faculty and staff who tend to be the most involved in addressing issues of inequity that directly impact students (Kezar & Lester, 2011). In this study, it was the women who are ‘on the ground’ that are invested in change work and working to influence change that positively impacts the experiences students have on their college campus.

### ***Profit Motives in Higher Education***

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) explain how the rise of academic capitalism since the 1970s has led to a linear focus on market forces and commercialization by upper-level administration and call this “the encroachment of the profit motive on the academy” (p. 9). This intrusion of commercialization on higher education has caused a shift in how institutions sideline efforts of inclusion in higher education and instead relocate revenue and financial stability at the forefront of administrative agendas. Participants in this study often spoke about how they experienced this ‘encroachment’ described by Slaughter and Leslie (1997). Participants described how executive leaders seemed to be focused on funding and revenue-generating activities and “performance indicators” as one participant called it and the constant pressure to demonstrate “relevance.” The term relevance resonates in the academic capitalism literature because it demonstrates the way competition is woven into higher education, and how professional staff must continually prove that they are productive and efficient, i.e., show their relevance.

McClure's (2016) study with administrators, faculty, and students defined the ways in which profit motives influence executive leadership and how their behavior facilitates the proliferation of academic capitalism on campus. The study identified the specific leadership activities, such as building infrastructure, creating new programs, cultivating donors, and raising funds, and setting a vision around entrepreneurship (McClure, 2016). The researchers also paid specific attention to the division that academic capitalism creates between faculty and administration. Historically, shared governance in higher education was heavily influenced by faculty and their vision for the direction of the institution (Birnbaum, 1989), but the influence of faculty began to diminish right around the same time scholars noted the rise of academic capitalism in higher education (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Faculty began to associate administration with "red tape, constraints, and outside pressures to alter the institution" (Birnbaum, 1989, p. 7), while administration saw faculty as "self-interested, unconcerned with controlling costs, or unwilling to respond to legitimate requests for accountability" (p. 7).

While the role of staff was largely missing from the early literature on institutional governance, these conflicting views between faculty and administration still demonstrate how institutions have shifted further away from the public good model of education. This matters to this study because faculty and staff often serve as the conscience of the university and so their positions and participation in shared governance is most likely centered on upholding the public good model of education (Kezar & Lester, 2011). The divide explained by McClure (2016) distances faculty and staff from the governance process and allows leadership to dominate the conversations and decisions that influence how the institution makes decisions, allocates resources, and

prioritizes campus issues. These institutional attacks on collectivism are essential to the maintenance of an academic capitalist culture, because these attacks isolate, divide, and silence the groups of people who are fighting for change and working to build an inclusive system.

### ***Reconfiguring and Unbundling of Faculty and Staff Work***

While academic capitalism explains how higher education has adopted a market-like focus and specifically focuses on the commodification of education, Kezar et al. (2019) explains how the corporatization of higher education also links to the decrease of both tenure appointments and staff positions. Some of the ways in which work has become ‘unbundled’ in higher education is through the appointment of part-time staff positions, outsourcing labor (such as in dining services, bookstore), and the increase of adjunct contracts. The underlying motive to unbundle work is to save money, increase managerial control, and relocate resources to institutional priorities that generate additional revenue and images of prestige and excellence. It means that we take “complex work processes and devise ways to reproduce them by disassembling the tacit expertise of higher skilled workers into the simplest components” (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 22). At the same time of decreases in tenure and hiring of staff positions, administrative positions have seen a 2.5% increase across public institutions with most of the new administrators coming from outside higher education (Kezar et al., 2019). The decrease in staff positions and the increase in administration was noted by participants, as well as the feeling that administration appears disconnected from the issues that matter most to students. This research underscores the importance of the role of faculty and staff in higher education

who are engaged in change work and committed to challenging institutional practices that contribute to persisting structural issues.

### ***Policy Discourses in Higher Education***

Policy discourses in higher education reinforce and uphold the neoliberal agenda of positioning education as a commodity to drive economic competition in the free market. An example of this can be seen in a report by the U.S. Department of Treasury and Department of Education (2012), *The Economics of Higher Education*, in which higher education is cited as the “driver of economic mobility,” and “vital to our nation’s future economic growth,” as well as how the nation can “meet the demands of today’s increasingly competitive global economy” (p. 2). In a policy issues document by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2020), titled *Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2020*, a word search of the document counts the words budget, financial, and/or funding a total of sixty-one times. Searching for the words diversity, equity, inclusion, racism, poverty, social issues return zero results. Most of the identified policy issues from the report represent a struggling economy and an explicit focus on finances, again tied to the state goals of higher education from the federal government. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2018), these highlighted policy issues (of finances and budget) drive institutional spending, including which programs and services to cut. As a result, Mitchell et al. (2019) explains that decisions to cut student services and course offerings has made it more difficult for students to persist and graduate and has contributed to the increase of racial and class inequalities in higher education.

### *Cost of Higher Education Outpaces Available Support*

A number of participants discussed financial aid issues that students experience and the importance of understanding financial aid procedures to assist students through the process. The problem with the financial support promised by HEOA (Higher Education Opportunity Act) under the Pell Grant program is that the cost of higher education is outpacing the financial support available to the 31% of low-income students enrolled in higher education (Pew Research Center, 2021). The Pell Grant program began in 1972, covered 77% of the cost of attendance at a 4-year public school and carried a maximum award of \$1,400 (Cook & King, 2007). However, in 2017, the Pell Grant only covered 29% of the cost of attendance at 4-year public school (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017) and carried a maximum award of \$5,290. Current Pell funding is 50 percentage points lower as compared to 1972. So, while tuition is increasing, the Pell Grant is not increasing at a similar rate, which has a disproportionate impact on low-income students.

This disparity in funding in relation to the cost of attendance demonstrates how the federal policies of HEOA fail to deliver on their initial promise of providing access to higher education for low-income students. This limited funding affects how likely students who identify as low-income are to be able to enroll, persist, and graduate from college. Burt and Baber (2018) conducted a discourse analysis of a 1978 hearing on federal aid and found that during this time the federal government noticeably shifted from seeing education as public good to a private good. The researchers connect the push to position funding for education as individual responsibility, as opposed to a public good to the influence of neoliberal ideology. Further, Burt and Baber (2018) argue that the reluctance for the government to speak on and take responsibility for educational

disparities for low-income and Black students traced back to the colorblind ideology of neoliberalism.

### ***Higher Education Act of 1965***

The Higher Education Act of 1965 is referred to here because it is the longest standing and most extensive federal law said to support college access, enrollment, and graduation rates for students of color and students who identify as low-income. In 2008, the Higher Education Act was amended to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) to underscore the importance of the word “opportunity.” HEOA lays out the federal policies governing federal student aid programs, federal aid to colleges, and support for students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented in higher education. The Higher Education Act (HEA) was created under President Johnson’s Great Society Agenda in 1965 in his proclaimed “war on poverty” that was meant to address issues of poverty and racial injustice (Zeitz, 2019). In this regard, HEA signified a promise to ensure access to higher education, regardless of family income level. Title IV of HEOA authorizes the programs that provide financial assistance and support to students, including both the Federal Pell Grant Program and Federal TRIO Programs (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2020).

The policies surrounding the Pell Grant Program and administration of TRIO programs impact the services and student support programs for first-generation, low-income, students of color, and/or students with disabilities so that they not only have access to higher education, but also persist to graduation. HEOA is generally reauthorized every five years to update policies and introduce new legislation. HEOA has not been reauthorized since 2008, so while the following policies have seen some minor revisions

in terms of funding, for the most part they have largely remained stagnant for the past twelve years. Despite the strategic use of the word “opportunity” in the 2008 reauthorization of HEA, federal efforts to keep up with the academic and social needs of students and the increase in college costs are lagging. In many ways this communicates the intention of the federal government and how they see their role in supporting the educational advancement of students. This is one example of how federal policy leans away from the public good model, which centers education as a social responsibility that all members of the community have access to participate.

### ***Tempered Radicals***

Many professional staff who work in higher education want to push back against the ways in which the influence of academic capitalism shows up in the practices of IHEs and they do so in different ways. Meyerson and Scully (1995) called one such group tempered radicals, a framework that was developed through their research with individuals working to influence change in their respective organizations. Tempered radicals are organizational insiders who are driven by “the incongruities between their own values and beliefs about social justice and the values and beliefs they see enacted in their organizations” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586). The word tempered is used deliberately because “they [tempered radicals] are tempered in that they have become tougher” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586). Tempered radicals influence change by confronting people and policies that sustain unfair and inequitable systems. Similar to Meyerson (2008), the participants in this study pushed their institutions to respond to persisting issues of structural inequities on campus, such as lack of diverse student representation in the decision-making process; reliance on strict evaluative and

performance measures in the classroom; and lack of financial aid opportunities for low-income students. They lead change by organizing people into collective action, raising an awareness of issues, making connections, and asking questions that push against institutional norms (Meyerson, 2008).

By virtue of their position in and knowledge of their institutions, tempered radicals are organizational insiders, and they work to balance participation in and opposition to institutional practices and policies. Their close connection to the institutions gives them an in-depth perspective of how things move and flow and the politics of the system they are working within (Meyerson, 2008). Tempered radicals experience feelings of conflict and frustration because while they are expected to uphold the policies and practices of the institution, they are also working against those very same policies and practices to bring about change (Meyerson, 2008). As a result, tempered radicals often feel like they are the margins of an institution because they represent the ideas or agendas that are at odds with the dominant culture (Meyerson, 2003).

### **Review of the Literature**

In conducting a literature review for this study, I attempted to understand how leadership has historically functioned in higher education and how the pressures of academic capitalism have influenced leadership priorities. I also sought to understand the barriers of engaging in change work within an institution and found that the framing of performance culture in Ahmed's (2012) work with diversity practitioners helped to shine light on the challenges experienced by participants. In this section, I present studies that have utilized the theory of tempered radicalism to frame how change agents experience influencing change. Lastly, the literature on emotional labor connects how women who

engage in change work often experience the additional pressure and unwritten expectation of engaging in relational work.

### ***Leadership and Higher Education***

Since the 1960s, leadership and organizational issues in higher education have been described as problematic because of the slow bureaucratic process, unclear goals, and a dualism of controls (Bensimon et al., 1989; Birnbaum, 1989). Nearly 40 years later, these problematic trends are still present in higher education. According to Kezar and Lester (2011), executive leadership, or what Astin and Astin (2000) referred to as hierarchical leadership, tends to be influenced by the pressures of finances, accountability measures, accreditation and state mandates, and activities that are associated with prestige. These leadership behaviors and interests have been theorized by scholars of academic capitalism as an expansion of extended managerial control (McClure, 2016), which is influenced by external market pressures and declining financial support from state governments. In this model, executive leaders have “the authority to shape policy, cultivate donors, allocate resources, manage personnel, and answer to stakeholders, they are uniquely positioned to cocreate and perpetuate networks bridging the university, state, and market” (McClure, 2016, p. 517). Participants in this study often discussed the ways in which leadership seemed to be disconnected from the day-to-day experiences of students. In their study of how faculty and staff engage in grassroots leadership, Kezar and Lester (2011) stated that there must be balance in leadership between faculty, staff, and executive leaders, so that the interests of the institutions are also balanced. If this balance is absent, colleges can become breeding grounds for demoralized faculty and staff, discriminatory practices, and disengaged students. To reimagine leadership in

higher education, a balanced approach to leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011) would consist of collective decision making and shared governance, as well as the conscious effort to re-distribute resources within the system of higher education.

While there are clearly issues of power and oppression that exist in the hierarchical structures of higher education, there has been extensive research and movement towards inclusive models of leadership (Stefani & Blessinger, 2017; Thompson & Matkin, 2020). An inclusive model of leadership is an intentional move towards transformation and inclusion and involves reimagining the way decisions and resources are allocated in higher education. Inclusive leaders seek out the feedback and expertise of faculty and staff at the institution so that the identification and solution for campus issues takes on a collaborative approach (Stefani & Blessinger, 2017; Thompson & Matkin, 2020). An inclusive model of leadership could potentially uplift and support the work of the community of faculty and staff engaged in change work.

### ***Tempered Radicals in Educational Spaces***

Previous studies in educational settings have used a tempered radicalism framework to understand how individuals can work both for and against the system simultaneously, how change work in an institutional setting is influenced by existing power structures, and how individuals exercise personal and collective power to mobilize others and build coalitions (Alston, 2005; Broadhurst & Martin, 2019; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Richter et al., 2020).

In Alston's (2005) study of how Black female superintendents worked both within and against the system she explains, "these women are radical in their ideals, but tempered in the fact that they work in the confines of organization" (p. 677). That is,

women were able to adhere to their personal values and ideals, which drove their efforts to advocate and persist in their positions. Alston (2005) found that tempered radical women persisted and made a difference in four ways: (1) initiating and maintaining relationships with those they serve; (2) drawing on their personal agency; (3) attending to the personal, political, and social context of situations; and (4) centering identity (race and gender) as a lens to understand a lived experiences (p. 684). Alston's (2005) study frames how women in this study engaged in both relational work and used their personal agency in their efforts to influence change.

While Alston's (2005) study focused on the relationships and agency of women in leadership positions, Kezar and Lester's (2011) study of tempered radicals and grassroots leaders focus on the specific strategies used by participants who work to facilitate change on their college campuses. Kezar and Lester (2011) found that faculty and staff drew on nine tactics to push change efforts, including: organizing campus-based intellectual opportunities, facilitating professional development, utilizing classrooms and curriculum as forums, mentoring students, hiring social activists, gathering resources and support, creating narratives using data, participating in existing networks, and collaborating with stakeholders off campus. These strategies are aligned with tempered radicalism because they seek to challenge institutional norms and encourage collectivism on campus. In addition to framing the strategies associated with tempered radical work, Kezar and Lester (2011) also drew attention to how power and hierarchical leadership can suppress the actions of individuals attempting to challenge institutional norms and culture. Specifically, staff are positioned in higher education to work within the confines of the institution and within their job description. For example, one participant was asked why

she involved herself in work outside of her job description, to discourage her participation in change work and to redirect her focus back to the work she was hired to perform. In addition, a limited number of staff have union protection and so there is a real possibility of losing your job if you challenge or push too much (Broadhurst & Martin, 2019).

Richter et al.'s (2020) study supports the idea that the tempered radical approach is one way for faculty and staff to draw attention to structural inequalities in higher education spaces. They conducted a study with five faculty members and used a critical personal narrative methodology to explore the tension of identifying as tempered radicals and scholar-activists from within an institution of higher education. The researchers found their role as tempered radicals and activists was one that “transforms and disrupts the neoliberal university” (p. 1) in their efforts to challenge administration and their ability to be critical of their institutions to influence change. However, researchers also found that the work of tempered radicals and scholar-activists was largely rendered invisible by the institution because of how neoliberalism influences the ways in which ‘work’ is valued or seen, work which does not represent profitable outcomes is often marginalized. Richter et al. (2020) suggest creating community and shared spaces between faculty, staff, and students as one way to acknowledge the importance of this work.

Broadhurst and Martin (2019) utilized the tempered radical framework in their study of how student affairs professionals work to create positive change for the LGBTQ student community. The study found that mentoring provided by student affairs staff helped students to learn how they can navigate social change and become visible

advocates for LGBTQ student rights on campus. The findings of this study demonstrate how the work staff who are advocating for policy changes also work to empower students and see them as partners in the process. Staff who engage in change work reaches beyond the experience of students while they are enrolled at the institution, the study found that students are graduating and feeling more prepared to serve as advocates for social change (Broadhurst & Martin, 2019). Some participants in this study engaged in similar tactics of exposing students to the ways to influence change on campus and discussed a similar goal of preparing students to be skilled in recognizing and advocating for social change. Broadhurst and Martin's (2019) study is an example of the reach and influence that change agents have beyond the institution. For participants engaged in change work it is not just about their resistance to the dominant ideologies of academic capitalism and neoliberalism, but also how their work involves building community with students and sharing their knowledge and passion for social change that is centered on inclusion.

### ***Diversity Work and Performance Culture***

Ahmed's (2012) research with diversity practitioners in higher education helps to frame the experiences of women who engage in change work; she explains that the efforts to transform institutions are most often performed by individuals who feel as though they do not inhabit the norms of the institution. Her study with diversity practitioners was grounded in both phenomenology and feminism to gain an understanding of how participants live and experience an institutional life while engaged in diversity work. Throughout her study with practitioners, Ahmed (2012) found that participants regularly felt as though it was like "banging your head against a brick wall" as they experienced constant resistance when challenging institutional norms (p.175). The

following section on emotional labor will expand on Ahmed's (2012) description of the challenges experienced by participants who engage in influencing change.

As participants in the study described, the activities, efforts, and spoken commitments of diversity often embody what Ahmed (2012) terms "performance culture" (p. 83). In higher education, performance culture consists of meetings, committee work, and writing reports, and the outcome of performance work is described as "a document that documents the inequality of the university becomes usable as a measure of good performance" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 84). When an institution positions itself as effective in addressing inequalities in higher education, it is at the same time concealing those very same inequalities (Ahmed, 2012). To guard against the theater of performance culture, efforts to address structural inequities on campus need to go beyond documents, meetings, and reports and be reflected in the policies, procedures, and practices of higher education to reframe the academic capitalist culture of higher education. For example, participants in this study shared how they witnessed and were part of conversations discussing supporting low-income students, students of color, and/or transfer students, but oftentimes there was no actionable follow up or process.

Burke (2020) built on Ahmed's (2012) identification of performance work in higher education and connects this to how feminist research in higher education illuminates the ways in which neoliberalism and the concept of performativity are interrelated. Performativity includes a reliance on measurement using evaluation and assessment in IHEs which position education with a corporate-like focus. Burke (2020) described this focus as adhering to market principles, such as productivity, branding, excellence, and recognition related to prestige (p. 72). Many of the women in this study

point to the corporate and business-like focus of their institution and how data and measurement are becoming prevalent in their careers.

### ***Emotional Labor in Higher Education***

The literature on emotional labor provides a context for how women experience the “brick wall” described by Ahmed (2012) through their attempts to influence change in higher education and the relationships and connections they build with students, administration, and the community. Hochschild (1983) introduced the term “emotional labor” to explain how women, mainly in service-oriented jobs, have to manage their emotions in order to demonstrate a publicly favorable response. The term has evolved from beyond the service industry and has come to encompass how women in professional settings are also expected to take on the role of managing and responding to the emotions of others. For women in higher education, it is understood as time spent mentoring students, demonstrating empathy, and managing the emotions of others (Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019) The act of engaging in emotional labor is situated in opposition to the influence of neoliberalism in higher education, which is guided by rationality, logic, productivity, and efficiency (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Lawless (2018) argues that the rise of emotional labor in academia is tied to the neoliberal shift in higher education, which forces individuals to work beyond their job description in the name of productivity and efficiency. Thus, developing relationships and communication as forms of emotional labor are woven into the expected labor practices of higher education.

Emotional labor in higher education encompasses the work performed that is not always clearly located on job staff descriptions or faculty contracts. Lawless (2018) argued that the neoliberal academy, in the interest of productivity and efficiency, has

continued to push the unwritten expectation that faculty take on emotional labor. In the context of this study, emotional labor encompasses not only the unassigned work in the name of doing and producing more, but it is also the unassigned leadership roles performed by participants in their efforts to influence change as well.

Emotional labor reinforces gendered norms of participation in IHEs. However, as will be discussed in chapter three, gender is not the only identity marker that determines social hierarchies. Race and ethnicity are also connected to how women engage in and experience emotional labor. Evans and Moore (2015) described how people of color experience emotional labor as they attempt to negotiate dominating ideologies of whiteness in IHEs and everyday racial microaggressions. In this context, emotional labor cannot only be reduced to the tasks as outlined above. Rather, it is a multi-layered experience that is a “time consuming and emotionally laborious process of decision making about how and when people of color will respond to racist institutional arrangements” (p. 449). Since women of color disproportionately engage in emotional labor, as compared to white women, they are more likely to experience the weight and heaviness of this work. Wharton (2009) described the effects of emotional labor for women as feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, feeling a disconnect from work, and an overall diminished sense of accomplishment. Collectively, these pieces can lead to burn out and ultimately the decision to completely detach or leave a job.

Engaging in emotional labor can lead to burnout, but despite this widely accepted consequence, consciously detaching from this work is not an easy decision to make (Miller et al., 2019). In their research with faculty teaching diversity courses as part of the general education curriculum, Miller et al (2019) found that faculty often were reluctant

to disengage from emotional labor because “holding a position of trust was difficult to turn down or escape” (p. 498). Staff who engage in diversity work and initiatives feel intimately tied to their work and so the decision to disengage has been described by one participant as “some of the hardest decisions I have ever made.” The literature on emotional labor mostly focused on the experiences of faculty members in higher education. Since there is minimal research of how staff experience emotional labor in higher education, this study will attempt to fill that gap and provide an understanding of how staff perceive their relational work in their efforts to influence change.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the conceptual framework and supporting literature for this study and connected the three elements associated with the experience of participants in this study: (1) the culture of higher education; (2) the strategies to influence change; and (3) how engaging in change work is understood and described. The theory of academic capitalism and the ways it is connected to neoliberalism locates the dominant culture that exists in IHEs. The theory of tempered radicalism identifies and names the strategies associated with influencing change in an organization. The supporting literature in performance work and emotional labor describes the experience of engaging in change work.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the methods selected for this study. I discuss my research design and reasoning for selecting a feminist lens in the phenomenological design of this project. Included in the methodology discussion is the role of the researcher, location of the study, recruitment of participants, a description of participants, sampling procedures, data analysis, and methods to ensure trustworthiness. Lastly, the limitations of the methods for this study are presented.

#### **Overview of Research Design**

A qualitative research design based on interviews was selected because it allows the researcher to draw attention to both the social and personal context of working in higher education (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Understanding the experiences and perceptions of women who take on unassigned leadership roles, the associated strategies, and emotional labor to push for and influence change at their institutions, requires in-depth conversations. This qualitative study is aligned with tenets of critical social research, which acknowledge the prevalence of racial, social, and economic discrimination in society and assumes that these layers of discrimination are woven into the social structure of society and the institutions within society (L. Harvey, 2011). This qualitative approach and the supporting data collection procedures of this study are used to understand the nature of higher education and how the systems of academia influence

the ways in which participants make sense of their relationship to the institution and engage in influencing change on their campus.

The qualitative method of this research study included the use of an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009), which is grounded in Heidegger's (1962) philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger's application of phenomenological analysis is appropriate for this study because it underscores the importance of understanding experience through the social context and location of participants (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). As supported by phenomenological practice, this study places a feminist lens (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2015) at the center of analysis to describe the ways in which women experience and engage with their institution and students. Exploring this complexity is supported by qualitative research because it "engages with people's perceptions and thoughts and examines what they might signify" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 4).

### ***History of Phenomenology***

Phenomenology emerged from the philosophical writings of Husserl (1859–1938) in which he conceptualized the meaning of both consciousness and experience, claiming that it is only through exploring our consciousness of an experience that we can begin to understand human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology centers the perceptions and interpretations of participants to come to an understanding of what Husserl defines as the essence of an experience (Vagle, 2018). Husserl positioned phenomenology as a scientific way to explore the concept of being, and he viewed phenomenology as presuppositional, meaning that coming to the essence of a phenomenon is an objective process (Peoples, 2021). To facilitate the objective process,

Husserl believed that researchers must first name their bias and assumptions and “bracket” their experiences and worldviews as to not impose the position of the self on the study (Lavery, 2003). As a student of Husserl, Heidegger (1889-1976) expanded on Husserl’s approach to phenomenological inquiry and broke away from his strict philosophical adherence to objectivity (Peoples, 2021). As Vagle (2018) explained, “Heidegger’s phenomenology unfolds the mind and world together-treating them as interconnected, and never separated,” thereby making an “ontological turn” from Husserl’s insistence on bracketing (p. 9). Heidegger’s work linked phenomenology to the study of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a way to gain an in-depth understanding of a text and through the process of deconstructing individual parts of a text the meaning as whole can be uncovered or discovered (Neuman, 2020).

### ***Hermeneutic Phenomenology***

As a student of Husserl’s, Heidegger expanded on Husserl’s philosophy of objectivity in the research process and repositioned how a researcher engages in phenomenological practice. Heidegger (1962) believed the researcher must be cognizant of their own experience and social identities and explicitly claim the ways in which their position relates to the research being conducted (Vagle, 2018). Subjectivity is stated by the researcher (researcher positionality) and woven into the analysis of data using a conceptual framework. In this study I draw on the theories of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and tempered radicalism (Meyerson, 2008) to interrogate the nature of higher education and how this nature impacts participants in their efforts to influence change. The literature on emotional labor in higher education (Lawless, 2018; Goerisch, 2019; Miller et al., 2019) provides an

understanding of how women experience their engagement in change work at their institution. A phenomenological approach for this study supports my process of understanding how participants perceive and describe the culture of higher education and ultimately how these perceptions inform women's decisions and actions to engage in leadership and advocacy work to challenge the institutional norms. Secondly, my position as a student affairs professional is similar to the professional position of participants in that we share a similar language and experience of working in higher education.

### *Applying a Feminist Perspective to Phenomenology*

Feminist theory and phenomenology complement each other, both philosophically and as an interpretive method to arrive at an authentic understanding of a lived experience. Further, feminist research pushes back against androcentric research that centers the views of white and privileged men and the idea of "being" as an experience that can be generalized, instead feminist researcher centers women's experience as knowledge (Gardiner, 2018).

The feminist lens for this study is located in the work of hooks (2015) and calls attention to the links among race, class, and positionality. As hooks (2015) described, "class structure in American society has been shaped by the racial politics of white supremacy; it is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge" (p. 3). Feminist perspectives name the connection between racial politics and class structure, and how these issues are ultimately tied to the dominant ideology of academic capitalism in higher education. Ahmed (2012) describes how feminism is not just about gender identity but encompasses a critical view of the subtle and not so subtle forms of institutional power and how those

points of power meet in terms of intersecting identities. This shows up in the emotional labor literature (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018) which theorizes how and why women of color are often the ones expected to perform the unrecognized and uncompensated (Melaku, 2022) forms of labor to support students to support institutional efforts of inclusion.

I consider engaging in change work similar to feminist work because the aims of both are to mitigate the impact that structural inequities (racism, classism, sexism, ableism) have on marginalized populations. Ahmed (2017) frames the feminist movement as a way to examine the ongoing existence of racism and sexism that is located in the structures of society. Further, hooks (2015) argued that when feminism is inclusive of the social and political experience of women, notably women who have been otherwise excluded from the earlier feminist movements, “we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation” (p. 27). The feminist lens of this study is in the definitions and perspectives of hooks (2015) and Ahmed (2017).

## **Research Design**

### ***Location of Study***

Participants for this study were recruited from public and private institutions throughout the United States. I decided to recruit participants without any boundary of location because the goal was to achieve a diverse sample in terms of institution type and size, as well as years of experience in the field. A total of six participants were recruited for this study. All six participants worked at a 4-year institution, with four participants employed by a public institution and two employed by a private institution. In terms of

institution size, three participants worked at a large school, one participant at a medium-sized school, and two participants at a small-sized school. Other institutional types included: Predominantly Black Institution (PBI), Public Ivy Institution, Religious-Affiliated, and Predominately White Institutions (PWI).

### ***Sampling Procedures***

The sampling procedures for this study were informed by Smith et al. (2009) and Vagle (2018). Smith et al. (2009) addressed the question of sample size and gave a general suggestion of three to six participants. Vagle (2018) stated there are no exact numbers of participants in phenomenological studies and that a study can have as few as one or two participants or as many as ten to fifteen. Considering both these perspectives from phenomenological research experts, I interviewed six participants for this study.

I chose to interview participants who identify as women, since feminist research supports placing both women's lives and marginalized identities at the center of social inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Secondly, the unassigned leadership and advocacy roles of engaging in change work is characterized as emotional labor in the literature and is mostly performed by women and women of color (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). In using a feminist lens for this study, I connect change work to feminist work in that both aim to challenge the ways in which formal systems in society maintain inequity along the lines of race, class, and gender. In selecting a 'women only' sample, this study leaned on the scholarly work of feminist scholars (Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 2015) and recognized the multiple oppressions women may experience, aside from gender identification. To ensure that this research did not reproduce the privileged viewpoints of white women in higher education, four out of the six participants selected for this study

identified as a woman of color. Staff positions ranging from direct support positions to middle and upper-level management were recruited to recognize the influence of participants across job categories.

A sample size of six participants allowed for a more prolonged engagement with each participant. Following the phenomenological philosophy of the hermeneutic circle allowed me to spend intentional time understanding the experiences of each participant, both during the interview and in the data analysis phase. This approach supports the feminist lens of my study through centering women's experience as knowledge and wisdom, which is arguably more important than achieving breadth for the purposes of this study.

### ***Recruitment Procedures***

Patton (2002) described snowball sampling as beginning with “well-situated people” to identify others who have knowledge of a particular topic or experience. For this study, I connected with higher education colleagues via email, including college access staff directors and advisors, directors in student affairs, faculty members, deans of students, multicultural center directors and staff, and faculty who work closely with students. A copy of the email I sent to my contacts is included in Appendix B. In the email I included the definition of change work, a description of the study, and asked that my contacts provide me names of individuals. When I reached out to the suggested contacts, I provided the definition of change work, a description of the study, what would be asked of them, and a link to complete a Google Survey Form (Appendix C: Participant Interest Survey). I reviewed the Participant Interest Survey results to ensure a diverse sample in terms of race/ethnicity, years of experience, current position, and the size and

type of institution currently employed. I then emailed everyone who completed the Participant Interest Survey and asked them to schedule an interview with me. Once an agreed upon time was reached, they received an email with a Zoom link and password to access our private meeting room, as well as an electronic copy of the Consent Form (Appendix A) for this study. Each participant signed and returned the Consent Form prior to the interview.

The Participant Interest Survey consisted of nine questions. Participant responses to the Race/Ethnicity question and the Year of Service question are in Table 1.

### **Overview of Study Participants**

Six participants were interviewed for this study. All participants were randomly assigned a pseudonym to ensure the confidentiality of their identities. Table 1 includes three descriptors for each participant: Race/Ethnicity, Years of Service, and Institution Size and Setting Classification. Race/Ethnicity and Years of Service was obtained from the Google Survey (Appendix C) that each participant completed prior to the interview. The Size and Setting Classifications are aligned with the definitions provided by the *Carnegie Classification of Institution of Higher Education*. The “lookup” feature on the Carnegie Classifications webpage allowed me to search for each school and obtain the most current information located in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information for Study Participants from Participant Interest Form*

*(Appendix C)*

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Name	Race/ Ethnicity	Years of Service	Institution Size & Setting Classification
Alana	Black or African American	3-5 years	4-year public, small
Fiona	White	More than 7	4-year public, large
Julia	Hispanic or Latino/a, White	More than 7	4-year public, large
Maya	Black or African American	More than 7	4-year private, small
Mona	White	More than 7	4-year public, large
Sara	Black or African American	5-7 years	4-year private, medium

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**Participant Orientation to the Field**

Alana works in an upper-level management position that oversees strategic communication, initiatives, and partnerships. She also provides support for academic innovations at her institution. She has dedicated her career to equity work and describes her current role as “a refreshing space to be in.” She recognizes the value of changing systems to help all students in higher education and identifies the values of such as “legacy impact work.” Her approach to the work involves educating stakeholders at the state and federal level.

Fiona's work focuses on faculty development, and she sees the classroom as a space where students can engage and explore the world. She entered the field through her interest in educational development and her passion is centered on equity and justice, especially in the context of the classroom and the exchanges that take place between faculty and students. In her approach to her change work, she explains, "I can't quite figure out how we do justice work by being okay taking no for answers."

Julia serves as an associate director of a college access program. She identifies the core of her job as showing up through advocacy and one-on-one conversations with students. She is energized by her work and strives to improve the student experience by identifying gaps and opportunities. Julia describes her approach to change work as identifying the needs of students, faculty and/or staff. She is skilled in using evaluation to assess how her program can improve and better support students.

Maya currently serves in a middle management position as the director of a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) campus office. She is committed to driving change efforts centered on inclusion and serves as a strong advocate and support system for her team. She identifies her approach to the work as leaning towards student success programming. Maya describes herself as someone who is always on the side of students who are left out and said she is the person "who will always push."

Mona works in staff position which provides direct student support. She has dedicated her career to supporting students, especially those who are marginalized. She calls herself a grassroots leader who looks for ways to move new ideas and projects. Her advocacy and community organizing work shows up in both her professional and

personal life. Throughout all her positions in higher education, she looks for ways to challenge the status quo through collective action with faculty and staff colleagues.

Sara is in a middle-management position and oversees a college access program for high school students who identify as first generation, low-income, and/or as underrepresented in higher education. Her work is centered on educating and empowering students to develop self-advocacy skills so that they feel prepared to engage in difficult conversations, especially with leaders across campus. As a supervisor, Sara works to support her team to build their strengths and feel prepared in their work with students.

### **Data Collection: Procedures and Protocol**

According to Smith et al. (2009), the most effective way to collect data for an interpretive phenomenological research study is by conducting semi-structured interviews to explore participant responses, modify questions based on response to obtain depth, and build rapport with participants. The role of the researcher is to facilitate the conversation and allow the conversation to go in the direction of participant responses. Based on this guidance, I developed an interview protocol with questions that addressed the many ways participants connected to the institutions and students within the context of their positions. The goal of the semi-structured interviews was to explore how participants described their engagement in influencing institutional change, their relationships with the institutions and students, and their perceptions of the culture of higher education. In line with phenomenology, I developed intentionally broad questions to encourage open and unstructured conversations (Vagle, 2018). As a student affairs practitioner, I was able to further engage with participants because we shared much of the same language and

had a common understanding of certain policies and programs that directly impact students' experiences in college. During the interviews, I asked participants to talk about their overall experiences in their current positions and current institutions, how they would identify and describe their change work, their perception of what has changed and/or remained the same in higher education throughout their years of experience, as well as advice they would offer to graduate students and/or professionals entering the field who are invested in similar work. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D for reference.

### **Data Analysis**

To conduct quality research, data analysis techniques and procedures should align with the methodology, epistemology, and theories of the study (Jones et al., 2014). Throughout the data analysis phase of this research, I adhered to the hermeneutic circle of phenomenological practice, which is a cyclical process that requires the researcher to be constantly reading, reflecting, and revising interpretations (Laverly, 2003). The hermeneutic circle is a revisionary process in which our understandings, judgements, and preconceived notions are constantly being revised (Peoples, 2021). Throughout my data analysis, I relied on the hermeneutic circle to come to a holistic understanding of each transcript and the commonalities between the transcripts.

The following section describes my process in detail. While these items are listed in order, my process did not always occur in a linear way. For example, I kept a binder of all the printed transcripts with my notes and often returned to the transcripts to re-read and revise my initial coding notes that were located in the margins. I continually revisited

many steps throughout the data analysis process, which consisted of returning to the literature, revising the coding documents, and revisiting initial interpretations.

### **Review Participant Transcripts**

The interviews for this research were conducted using Zoom for video conferencing. After each interview, I was able to download a full audio transcript from the Zoom platform of my conversation with participants. To ensure accuracy of these auto-generated transcripts, I listened to each interview while reviewing the transcript and made any necessary corrections to the transcript prior to beginning my initial noting on each transcript. Following the review of each participant transcript, I emailed each participant a copy of our transcribed conversation so that they could review it.

### **Initial Noting of Transcripts**

Following the completion of each semi-structured interview, I engaged in a line-by-line reading of the transcripts and began to analyze and code each transcript. Smith and Shinebourne (2012) identified the detailed analysis of each transcript as an idiographic mode of inquiry, which involves focusing on the individual transcript in the data analysis process to come to an understanding of how each participant experiences the phenomenon being studied prior to looking at commonalities across cases. On each printed copy of the participant transcript, I highlighted important words and/or quotations. Part of engaging in line-by-line analysis involves making note of what each part of the interview reveals about the whole (Vagle, 2018). This included words that were repeated, phrases that seemed significant, and topics that appeared most relevant to the participant (Van Manen, 2017). As I highlighted the transcripts, I made notes in the margin of their significance and relevance to this study. Those notes included such

phrases or words such as empowerment, managing emotions, relevance, always being asked, whiteness, and emotional labor.

### **Primary Coding Document**

I created a primary document with three columns to organize the highlighted quotations and associated handwritten notes located in each transcript. The first column was a listing of all the codes made in the transcript (i.e., empowering students, building partnerships, managing emotions); the second column was the direct quote from the participant and where to locate the quote in the transcript; and the third column was my interpretation, questions, and/or how the words of participants connected back the conceptual framework and literature presented in chapter two. This document was shared with my major professor for their review and feedback. Sharing and receiving feedback on the primary coding document allowed me to engage in peer debriefing and to check accuracy of my interpretation and analysis, both of which supports the trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also sent the transcribed interviews to participants via email to engage in member checking.

### **Reflexivity and Memo Writing**

I practiced reflexivity through memo writing, which documented my initial reactions to interviews and acted as a space to reflect on where those reactions came from, as well as to identify how my personal subjectivities came into play while listening to and re-reading the transcripts. In phenomenological practice, the researcher should make note of why considered items highlighted in the transcript are important to this research study. Following this guidance, I included my interpretation of what was important in both my memo writing and primary coding document. After reflecting on

my notes on the transcripts and the commonalities in my primary coding document, I condensed this information into a coding frame.

### **Coding Frame**

I created an initial coding frame that consisted of all the overarching themes and the associated subthemes located in the primary coding document. To ensure that my findings aligned with my research questions, I aligned each overarching theme with the respective research questions of this study: (1) How do participants make sense of their experiences of change work in higher education? and (2) In what ways do participants describe their efforts to persist in their attempts to influence change?

The first draft of my coding frame had four overarching themes and eleven subthemes and is outlined below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*First Draft of Coding Frame*

<b>Emotional &amp; Invisible Labor</b>	<b>Resistance &amp; Social Actions</b>	<b>Empowerment &amp; Barriers to Empowerment</b>	<b>Academic Capitalism in Higher Education</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relationships &amp; Connections</li><li>• Invisibility</li><li>• Navigating &amp; Mediating</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal</li><li>• Relational</li><li>• Institutional</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal Leadership</li><li>• Institutional Actors</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Performance Work</li><li>• Individualism</li><li>• Oppressive Evaluative Systems</li></ul>

I then re-read the transcripts and my coding notes in the margins and saw where subthemes and overarching themes could be condensed and narrowed my findings down to two overarching themes and five subthemes. I initially had emotional labor and

invisible as an overarching theme, but after re-reading the transcripts decided that it did not holistically capture the experience of change work. I went through my coding notes again and pulled out the most common experiences of change work. After I did that, I renamed the overarching theme to experiences of change work and included relational work (which consists of emotional and invisible labor in the findings). While emotional labor was present, it was not present in enough of the cases to be considered an overarching theme. In my process of organizing my findings, I also noticed only one participant talked about mediation, so that was removed from the subtheme. The overarching theme of empowerment and disempowerment was re-located as a subtheme of experiences of change work because feeling empowered and/or feeling disempowered was always talked about by participants in the context of their experiences. I renamed the overarching theme of resistance and social actions to strategies of survival because the common thread in my coding notes always connected back to how participants were able to persist in their work, either through individual actions (personal agency) or working with the community to build partnerships. Finally, the overarching theme of academic capitalism in higher education spoke to how participants experienced their change work and what types of pressures they frequently discussed, so I relocated and renamed that overarching theme to pressures of evaluation and relevance under experiences of change work. My final coding frame is detailed in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2**

*Final Coding Frame*



**Triangulation**

One of the methods used to triangulate data in a qualitative study is to return to the literature to locate where participant stories and conceptual framework overlap or relate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). In this study, I continually returned to the literature to re-read and, at certain points, add additional literature that I did not first consider. For example, throughout the data analysis process, many of the strategies, barriers, and labor performed by the participants were located in the literature on emotional labor, performance work, and tempered radicalism. In describing the culture of the institution, the theory of academic capitalism and neoliberalism were also woven throughout the participants' stories. Another method to achieve triangulation is to provide participants the opportunity to review the interview transcripts (Carlson, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Each participant received a copy of their transcript via email to read for accuracy. I requested that participants send me any changes, corrections, or needed omissions. If any changes were requested by the participant, the transcript was updated to

reflect the request. Additional forms of data may have strengthened the triangulation methods of this study. For example, a second interview with participants would have allowed me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and engage in further member checking by sharing my analysis of data from the first interview. Secondly, a closer review of institutional and/or state policies of the women's home institutions would have provided a more in-depth understanding of the social, political, and economic factors that influence change work.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility: Researcher Positionality**

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) recommend that researchers practice reflexivity and disclose their subjectivities and assumptions to readers. This process involved reflecting on my professional position, my interest in this research, and my social identities (Jones et al., 2014). I acknowledge that as a qualitative researcher and as the primary research instrument in data collection, I bring to this study my own lived experiences which influence the subjectivities and assumptions I hold.

My professional work in student affairs for the past fourteen years has been with federally funded programs that serve students who identify as first-generation, low-income, and/or as underrepresented in higher education. In my current position as a director at a state institution, I oversee a department of thirteen people and five college access programs, four of which are federally funded and one which is funded by the state. As both a staff member in higher education and novice researcher, I approach my work with a critical lens that asks how a campus environment, its policies, and programs can be more inclusive of all student experiences, identities, and backgrounds.

I do not think that IHEs as a whole have done enough in terms of actionable items to address the structural inequities in higher education, which manifest themselves as racism, sexism, classism, ableism and other forms of identity discrimination. But there are many of us in higher education who think about this daily and show a critical awareness of campus issues and take on unassigned leadership and advocacy roles to resist the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain and reproduce structural inequities. Unfortunately, the process of change in higher education can feel slow and more complicated than it needs to be. I have often experienced the palpable resistance to changing policies and practices that better support students. In my 14 years of experience, I've witnessed the ways institutions may privilege physical space for programs that generate revenue as compared to college access programs and student support related offices. I find meaning and direction in working with my team to find ways to better support students and building a collective mindset that centers community and collaboration.

In terms of my social identities, I was raised in a large, working class Italian Catholic family and am first generation born in the United States and a first-generation college graduate. I identify as a white, cisgender, and middle-class woman, which means that I do not have many of the same lived experiences as participants of color or those who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth. Even as I am first generation, I acknowledge that being white makes engaging in change work look and feel different. This is particularly true in terms of the unwritten expectations placed on me and the ways in which I internalize resistance to change from the institution.

I engaged in memo writing throughout the data analysis process to reflect on the ways in which my experiences may not have always reflected that of participants. For example, there are significant differences in how participants of color experience emotional labor as compared to white women. First, women of color experience a disproportionate amount of emotional labor in higher education, they are often expected to be the ones to speak up, to help, and to carry the weight of addressing racism and racial incidents that occur on campus. White women are not expected to do the same and do not feel the same pressure and unwritten expectation and can oftentimes sit on the sidelines and choose not to engage and so their experiences of emotional labor do not weigh as heavily. Secondly, participants of color also shared that when they respond to racial issues on campus and try to explain to administration the need for action, they are often told they are not willing to collaborate or lacking compassion. This is one way that institutional leaders recast the experiences and knowledge of women of color and their care and passion for the work, as aggressiveness, stubbornness, or unwillingness.

### **Limitations**

This section recognizes and identifies the limitations associated with qualitative research and this particular study. Qualitative research criticisms include not being able to generalize findings and not being able to control for the effect of researcher subjectivity in the interpretation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study only represents a snapshot of the experiences of women working in higher education to create equitable changes on their campuses.

The findings of this research are not considered generalizable because women's experiences working in higher education can be widely different. Further, they are based

on certain identity markers, institution type, and other factors such as current administration and other specific institutional characteristics. Racism, sexism, and classism show up uniquely in different times, spaces, and places and the work that individuals take on to push against these structural inequities is always changing. For that reason, there is very much a temporal specificity to this research study. However, the findings of this project may offer transferability, in some instances, to individuals who feel as though they have had similar experiences in higher education and/or similar worldviews and identities. This study is also limited in terms of the identities of the participants, because I did not ask participants to identify their sexual orientation, disability status, or religious affiliation. A study which focused on additional markers of identity may have allowed for a deeper understanding of participant experience.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter three provided the framework for this study in terms of methodology and the use of a feminist perspective. The phenomenological approach is applied to understand the lived experiences of women working in higher education who identify as engaging in change work on their campuses. Chapter four will detail the findings of this research and describe how participants understand and name the environment of higher education and their experience as change agents working within an institution.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

*There's a reason you've been destined to do this work, show up as yourself, come authentically - come as you and do the work as you because it is exhausting, it is draining, no one has the energy to try to do that work under a facade. Be you, you've got very valuable insights and perspectives to offer, and they are just as valid as anybody else's. Alana*

The purpose of this study was to understand how women in staff positions experience change work and how they persist in their efforts to influence change as an institutional insider. These are the women who are 'on the ground' and attempting to mitigate the pressures of administration and the needs of students. The strategies and tactics of tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) represents some of the ways in which women work to influence change and maintain the public good model of higher education (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008). Tempered radicals may not have formal authority, but they are politically savvy and know how to strategically work from within a system to push against institutional norms (Meyerson, 2008). In this study women engaged in relational work, developed connections, and built partnerships in their efforts to challenge people and systems to re-think widely accepted practices.

The goal of a phenomenological study is to capture the essence of an experience and to illuminate the complexities of a social phenomenon by going "directly to the source" (Vagle, 2018, p. 59). The women in this study brought an understanding of how

leading change work while being employed by an institution of higher education is complex because of the numerous systems, structures, and personalities at play, all of which are constantly moving and shifting. The participants describe their experience of change work within a particular time and space and their stories represent how all social actions have an unfinished agenda (Ahmed, 2012)

Throughout the data analysis process, a phenomenological researcher interprets the ways in which the phenomenon being studied impacts the lived experiences of participants (Alase, 2017). Smith and Osborne (2015) described this process as the researcher seeking to make meaning of participant stories, while the participant is also engaging in the process of making sense of their own experience.

Two overarching themes and five subthemes emerged from the data, which include six interviews and subsequent reflection and analysis in my research journal. The findings address the following research questions: (1) How do participants make sense of their experiences of change work in higher education? and (2) In what ways do participants describe their efforts to persist in their attempts to influence change? Figure 3 below provides demographic information for the six participants in this study.

**Figure 3.**

*Demographic Information for Participants (Participant Interest Form: Appendix C)*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Years of Service</b>	<b>Institution Size &amp; Setting Classification</b>
<b>Alana</b>	Black or African American	3-5 years	4-year public, small
<b>Fiona</b>	White	More than 7	4-year public, large
<b>Julia</b>	Hispanic or Latino/a, White	More than 7	4-year public, large
<b>Maya</b>	Black or African American	More than 7	4-year private, small
<b>Mona</b>	White	More than 7	4-year public large
<b>Sara</b>	Black or African American	5-7 years	4-year private, medium

## Overarching Theme One: Women's Experiences of Change Work

*I am always trying to think who are we not serving and what we should be doing differently. I'm really awful at, if you ever hire me, and say can you just keep doing what we've always done...I'll be miserable, I just can't. Mona*

**Figure 4**

*Women's Experiences of Change Work Subthemes*

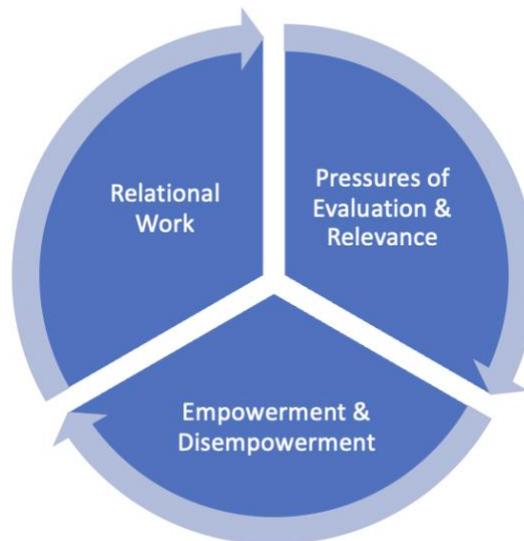


Figure 4 illustrates the first overarching theme of this study, which represents the common experiences of change work and the associated subthemes of: (1) Relational Work; (2) Pressures of Evaluation and Relevance; and (3) Empowerment and Disempowerment. The complexity in the experiences of change work surfaced in participant stories of how relational work was connected to their sense of purpose, but also a source of emotional and invisible labor; of how the pressures of evaluation and relevance made participants feel constricted in their work; and of how women

experienced feelings of both empowerment and disempowerment within the same institution.

***Subtheme One: Relational Work***

While participants described most relationships as a source of meaning and purpose, there were times when relationships felt exhausting and led to emotional labor. These were the relationships with people at the institution who did not espouse the same values of social change and justice. Participants described relationships with students and watching them transform and develop personally and academically throughout their college experience as one of the most fulfilling parts of their careers (Hirt et al., 2005). At the same time, some participants also made the connection between relational work and burnout because of years of working with students and staff and taking on their problems, issues, or traumas (Raimondi, 2019).

Relational work with leaders involves managing up - which is also exhausting because while participants are trying to do their jobs, they are also trying to make leaders understand the issues students are experiencing and some of the ways to respond to those issues (Kezar & Lester, 2011). Alana serves in an upper-level management position at public institution that supports strategic communication and initiatives. She has “seen the spectrum when it comes to administration being fully invested in change work” and offered her perspective in this study on why “not all institutional leaders are created equal.” She brought an understanding to this project of why there is not one way to characterize or generalize institutional leadership.

Similar to the findings of Hirt et al. (2005), several participants indicated that building relationships and engaging in meaningful work are the most fulfilling aspects of

working in higher education. While relational work was found to be both meaningful and enjoyable for participants and connected to how they come to understand the student experience, it is also a source of time-intensive, invisible, and emotional labor. Emotional labor for individuals in staff positions was characterized as the ability to effectively work with colleagues who have different interests and opinions, to demonstrate sensitivity in responding to personal situations of students and staff, and to be able to balance the interests and pressures of leadership with your own personal agenda, values, or beliefs (Mastracci et al., 2010). Mastracci et al. (2010) describes emotional labor “at the heart of service delivery” (p. 132), which particularly resonates with staff professionals in higher education because of the ways in which their work is focused on providing student services centered on meeting the needs of students (Hevel, 2016).

However, service work is not simply an altruistic activity, it also leads to feelings of invisibility and exhaustion. Emotional labor is more pronounced for women of color (Lawless, 2018) and leads to experiences of invisibility (Melaku, 2022), which in this study manifested as always being asked to serve in capacities beyond women’s job descriptions and working with leaders who fail to recognize how their identity connects to their efforts to recognize and respond to campus racial issues that impact students. Melaku (2022) names these experience of invisible labor as both unrecognized and uncompensated.

**Relational Work with Students.** The role of student affairs staff in higher education is one of service-delivery that focuses on the social and psychological needs of students (Astin & Astin, 2000; Kezar & Lester, 2011). To deliver meaningful services, staff attempt to understand both the identity development and needs of students so they

can plan culturally relevant and affirming student services (Astin & Astin, 2000; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). To that end, the women in this study often centered relational work with students to foreground their work in advocating for students and developing programs and services.

Sara serves as the Director of a college access program at a private institution that recruits and enrolls students from local high schools in their preparation for college, she is responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the programming and supervising staff. She talked about the importance of relational work with students and framed it as the frequent interactions and conversations she has to build her awareness.

The less you work with students, the less you understand what students need.

When you have that direct contact with students, you know what they need because you are around them all the time. You're having conversations, you understand their relationships with their friends, parents, teachers. But when you're not with them there's that disconnect.

Sara's connection with students is based on who they are holistically, outside of her program and outside of their high school experience. Her relational work connects to the purpose of student affairs staff and their commitment to understanding the "the whole nature of the student and how all their experiences influence learning" (Sandeen & Barr, 2014, p. 7). The relationships that students have with faculty and staff across the campus leads to an increased sense of belonging, improved persistence and graduation rates, and opportunities for students to form connections with their peers (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Hoffman, 2014). If it is our goal to improve the campus experience for students and address persisting structural inequities, then it is through the lens of relational work with

students that faculty and staff can understand how to support students and systems that advance change work. The problem is that campus leadership is often removed and distant from the student experience (Rizzo et al., 2021). When leadership does not have the connection and relationship to students that Sara described, their decisions and priorities center on financial pressures and remaining competitive in the education market (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). This pulls leadership and the institution further away from the public good model of education and the shared purpose of recognizing structural inequities and improving the campus experience for students through collaborative relationships and services that center community and inclusiveness (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008).

Like Sara, Julia's relational work with students is foundational to her change work. Julia serves as the Associate Director of a college access program at a public institution where she is responsible for onboarding new staff, overseeing the academic services of the program, and managing a caseload of advisees. She said, "The real core of the work really shows up through advocacy and one-on-one conversations with students." Julia takes the time to build relationships with students, which allows her to both understand and speak on equity and access issues that impact retention. She is currently co-leading a working group to "look at student resources using an equity and access lens." Julia connects her relational work with students and her ability to engage in advocacy work at her institution in that she has first-hand knowledge of how students are experiencing their campus.

In contrast to Sara and Julia, Alana's role at her institution is not in a student-facing staff position. While Alana's relational work with students may look different, her

commitment to improving the college experience for students is similar. Alana explained her relationship to students and the institution:

As a Black woman in America, I have a stake in the success of these students in this community, and this institution. And I understand the impact that it has on our whole collective. You know when we focus on those who have been most marginalized, we don't just increase outcomes for them and their families, we increase outcomes for everybody, everybody wins when you invest in people.

As a woman in upper management who manages strategic communication and initiatives Alana's position may not necessarily be as visible to students on campus, as compared to staff who serve as advisors and coordinators of college access programs. Seeing the impact that education has on students and their families "keeps me in this work" she explained. Alana's perspective demonstrates that women who engage in change work are located at all levels within the institution. Relational work may look different depending on the positions staff have, but the underlying goal of improving outcomes for students from marginalized backgrounds is similar. Because there is a similar goal there is a benefit in forming relationships between departments and offices to influence change.

**Relational Work with Colleagues and Team Members.** Relational work with colleagues and team members was described as an enjoyable purpose-driven activity, but also led participants to question how much of themselves they can devote to developing and sustaining relationships. For some participants, relational work meant that they had to understand the positions, emotions, and reactions of colleagues in their conversations so that they could form networks to facilitate change. Relational work was also described by

the significant amount of time that supervisors devoted to their teams to help them develop personally and professionally.

Fiona serves in a faculty development role at a public institution, she is responsible for leading workshops and providing consultations to support student learning. She engages in relational work with faculty to support student engagement and learning in the classroom. She intentionally chose a career in educational development because she felt a connection to the community of education developers and described it as:

A space in which I was feeling less of the— let's call them personal agendas—that drive a lot of behavior in higher ed and more of an authentic thrust for justice in furthering education on mission of a higher education institution.

Fiona's orientation to her work is connected to the "service mission" of the field of educational development, as she described it, and the opportunity to work within a community of scholars who are justice oriented. When she talked about her relationships with faculty, she said that she brought "all of myself to the people [faculty] that I serve" and that she has "built very authentic relationships with all of them." She said, "It's not a burden to me to build relationships with people, it's something that I enjoy, it's why I do what I do." While Fiona recognizes the value of building relationships, she also acknowledged the limitations:

But it [building relationships] does take time and does take energy and it's something that is not easily quantified in reports. Right, so it's there in terms of how effective I am in retaining community, how many people sign up for things that I offer, and how many people keep following up with us. But it's very hard to

keep going and I often find myself thinking about it that way. How many people can you feasibly have an authentic - 'I'm here for you, whenever you need me' - relationship with.

While relationships are something that Fiona enjoys and are connected to her purpose of centering justice and equity work in the classroom, she also described how relationships can be "hard to keep going." One of the reasons that relationships are difficult to sustain over time is because the work it takes is not always visible or recognized by leadership as an efficient use of time.

Like Fiona, the ability to sustain relationships was true for Mona as well. Mona works in a direct student support staff position at public institution, she is responsible for working with students on a 1-1 capacity. She provided an example of a time she was asked to redirect her energy from her relational and change work with students and colleagues. She said, "I've definitely been dinged a bunch of times" and was told 'why are you working on that? You need to spend more time in our office doing these things.'" Cole and Heinecke's (2020) study of neoliberal influence in higher education helps to explain why leaders render relational work unnecessary - it is through their hyper focus on productivity and revenue-driven activities. Mona's story also sheds light on how staff in higher education experience emotional labor: it is through the expectation to balance the written and unwritten expectations of efficiency and productivity with the work that staff find purpose in and feel passionate about. As she described, it is the work associated with determining "who we are not serving" and "what we [the institution] should be doing differently." Instead of being supported by leadership, these change agents are often questioned and then redirected to focus on other aspects of the job.

Many participants also talked about the high turnover rates in higher education for staff and administrators, which is expected to continue to rise in the next year due to the precarious nature of the pandemic that is constantly shifting the expectations of student services and instructional delivery (Stebbleton & Buford, 2021). The lack of recognition surrounding relational work, combined with the high rate of turnover contribute to the unsustainable nature and future of relational work.

Both Sara and Alana discussed how burnout is a real possibility for women in higher education. Sara said, “It’s not easy working with our student population” and shared how staff often take on the personal struggles and situations of students, including mental health issues, family separation, and financial concerns. In a similar way, Alana explained that burnout can come from witnessing the trauma of everyone in the community: “I think a lot of time, professionals take on traumas of our students or our peers or other folks. And it weathers you and it weighs.” Both Alana and Sara described how taking the time to manage the day-to-day weight of responding to student and colleague issues and caring for yourself in the process can prevent burnout.

Maya serves as the Director of a DEI office at private institution, she is responsible for working with colleagues across the institution to support student identity development and is also a staff supervisor. She offered a clarification on what burnout can look like:

Burnout is not just like I’ll get a pedicure. It’s trauma and it has been through years of trauma in higher ed and people don’t want to call it that, but it is and that’s why people leave because they need to breathe.

Maya is describing the “secondary trauma” (Lynch & Glass, 2019, p. 1) that staff experience as the cumulative and compounded byproduct of listening and responding to

the trauma students experience while at the same time trying to navigate conversations with people at the institution who refuse to change and/or acknowledge what students are experiencing. Maya explained that this is even more pronounced in diversity work, as compared to other staff positions on campus, because of the close work her office does around supporting and acknowledging student identity development. Marshall et al. (2016) cites that 50% to 60% of people in student affairs positions leave within five years, mostly due to a lack of work-life balance. The decision to leave the profession can be caused by numerous factors, such as giving too much of oneself to the job and colleagues and not considering the mental toll it takes. Maya talked about how staff work does not always allow for a work-life balance because of the expectation to “to work 50 to 60 hours a week.” The problem in student affairs is that as more people leave the field, the ones who remain are expected to pick up additional work and duties at a time when staff already feel as though they are at capacity.

Most of the participants brought up the reality of burnout when I asked them what advice they would give to graduate students or other professionals entering the field who are committed to change work. This common response demonstrates how their dedication to student well-being can have a significant personal cost. Sara described how she has proactive conversations with her team about developing boundaries even as they dedicate themselves to motivating and supporting students. She does this to help her team recognize the signs of burnout and how to care for themselves in the process.

Fiona described the problem of work-life balance as “this instinct of always putting others before self is something that I think draws me to this field draws me to doing justice work, but it can be very dangerous on a personal level.” Engaging in

“justice work” as Fiona named it, is important and impactful, but it also requires a significant amount of mental and physical energy. The constant effort of trying to change systems and reimagine how services and instruction is delivered requires a huge emotional investment (Gorski & Chen, 2015), which leads people to neglect their own personal well-being in the process, either because of guilt or lack of resources and support. Gorski and Chen (2015) studied the phenomenon of activism and burnout and found three common symptoms among activists: “deterioration of emotional and psychological health, deterioration of physical health, and disillusionment and hopelessness” (p. 402). Recognizing these symptoms of burnout provide direction and insight as to how supervisors and institutional leadership can support the faculty and staff who engage in change work.

**Relational Work with Executive Leadership.** Relational work with executive leadership is one way to navigate the “power dynamics” in higher education (Kezar & Lester, 2011, p. 164) and allows faculty and staff to build networks with leadership who will support their change work. Faculty and staff who seek out intentional relationships with administration have a better understanding of the position, interests, and agenda of leadership and can use this information to sustain their advocacy efforts. It is a tactic to understand the institutional politics of how and who helps change flow, and on the other side who represents the blockage in the system (Ahmed, 2017). Sara described that in her deliberate relational work with leadership she proactively connects with administration to share student stories and to invite leaders to attend program events. She said, “If I’m not building those relationships and letting them know that I’m here to support, I’m not necessarily going to have that support if I’m just going to reach out when the moment is

convenient.” She explained, “It’s hard because I’d rather not have the connection. Why waste the time? But I also realized I can’t operate that way.” Sara points to her previous supervisor as being skilled at managing institutional politics and that witnessing her supervisor partake in these political connections helped Sara to better understand how to engage in a similar way. She described it as a “political game” and explained that “understanding people’s motives is very important and understanding that not everyone is necessarily on your side.” Sara realized that her ability to influence change and understand the political players is connected to the relationships she builds with executive leadership. She connects the likelihood of receiving support from administration to how visible she makes herself.

While Sara has the autonomy to communicate with executive leadership and reach out as she sees fit, the opportunity to build networks with leadership is not the same for Mona. She described her institution as “having a lot of levels of administration” and the expectation from her supervisor is “you will not email anyone in the Chancellor’s office, or even the Vice Chancellor.” The unwritten expectation for staff is to ‘stay in your lane,’ a reference that some participants made when talking about the structure of higher education overall. Regulating who staff cannot speak with is one way to isolate and silence the efforts of both faculty and staff to organize and mobilize their change efforts (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

**Relational Work and Invisible Labor for Women of Color.** The relational work performed by the women of color in this study suggests that women of color carry a disproportionate amount of emotional labor as compared to white women. Emotional labor was located in the participant stories of always being asked to serve because of a

minoritized racial or gender identity, as well as the efforts of communicating with an administration that adopts a colorblind way of thinking.

Julia discussed how always being asked to serve in roles outside of her position can feel “heavy.” Julia said:

The same people are often called on over and over again, because they might be capable or competent, or the only person of color in a department, or the only woman. And so, what often feels heavy is being asked to always serve in different capacities outside my role.

The unwritten expectations of always being asked to serve and participate on committees is one-way institutions stand to gain from the emotional labor that women of color take on as faculty and staff members. Women of color are often asked and expected to take on additional support and advocacy roles for students of color that are neither compensated nor recognized (Lawless, 2018; Melaku, 2022). According to Melaku (2022), “this invisible labor manifests in the form of an inclusion tax that they must pay to be included in white spaces.” (p. 1). Women of color who engage in change work are pushing and fighting for their students to be represented and included in all aspects of their college experience, and at the same time they are also expected to take additional duties to lead institutional inclusion efforts. In her personal account of resigning as a faculty member, Duncan (2014) further explains that women of color in higher education are both “commodified” and “overused” (p. 43) and one of the reasons for that is because IHEs want to position themselves as attentive and committed to diversity and inclusion.

Maya shared her experience of how leadership and institutions sometimes forget “the people part of these positions.” She explained that if leadership understood that what

she does in her work with students is tied to who she is, they wouldn't be so callous in communicating decisions that are made at the executive level:

What I do around DEI work is always tied to who I am, how I show up in the world. I think people can say that in higher ed many of us get into the field because of our own experiences, how we show up. But literally, when I have to have a conversation around race relations on campus or racial incidents on campus that is literally me, I'm talking about in those conversations, so it's hard not to take things personal.

Maya's personal connection to her DEI work is centered on both her identity and experiences. When she tells leadership a story about a student experience, she has probably also experienced it herself or she knows that "my students are experiencing it at this institution." When leadership callously responds to campus racial incidents, it is both invalidating and a way to avoid their discomfort in talking about race. Maya's experience demonstrates how leaders in higher education often conform to ideologies of colorblindness. Colorblindness denies the existence of discrimination and views disparity in resources and outcomes as tied to personal choices and not due to exclusionary history and lingering racism that still exists in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). According to Gordon (2005) colorblind ideology in education is "a bid for innocence, an attempt to escape our responsibility for our white privilege. By claiming innocence, we reconcile ourselves to racial irresponsibility" (p. 143). The conscious act of removing race from the conversation perpetuates the idea that we live in post-racial society (Whitehead et al., 2021).

## *Subtheme 2: Pressures of Evaluation and Relevance*

*Higher ed is very much part of what I call the capitalist beast. -Fiona*

Participants described how the pressures of evaluation sidelined the importance of student experiences and collided with their efforts to sustain academic freedom in the classroom and work. These pressures to “please the university,” as Sara named it, and to constantly think in terms of “performance indicators” as Mona called it, make staff feel like the institution is not as committed to students as they claim to be. These pressures are described by staff as the ways in which administration leans on neoliberal ideals of production, efficiency, and demonstrating excellence in the knowledge industry (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). The pervasiveness of linear evaluation in higher education positions staff professionals between the corporate and market-focused goals of higher education and the public good model which aims to holistically support the needs and experiences of students (Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Kezar & Lester, 2011).

Fiona talked about how the evaluative systems in higher education lack transparency, stand in the way of learning and experimentation in the classroom, and discourage opportunities for the open exchanges of ideas. In thinking about how to disrupt the evaluation practices in higher education, she asked: “How do we make that a safe enough space for people to actually engage in the process as a formative tool, rather than what it constantly ends up being, which is a pretty oppressive evaluative system?” Evaluation systems limit the opportunities to take risks and reimagine both student services and academic instruction by impeding “our willingness to go the extra mile, our intrinsic motivation of why something matters,” according to Fiona. The accreditation processes and the associated quality and standards that dominate higher education are

focused on compliance as opposed to transformation of learning - and these measures largely ignore the research, the nature, and the different styles of learning (L. Harvey, 2002). Fiona envisions the classroom experience as “the building of relationships and opening the possibility for authentic questioning and disagreement” and as a space “where we try things out rehearse so that then we go in the world out there and try and do something different than the script different than the established norms.” She connected the use of evaluation in higher education to the “capitalist beast” and explained it as “we’re part of a capitalist culture that wants to measure and praise the demonstration of success.”

Like Fiona, Mona believes that building community and the freedom to learn is not supported by the ways in which institutions facilitate the use of evaluation and assessment. When she hears educators talk about students and performance indicators she said: “I cringe. These are students, not performance indicators.” While Mona finds this language off-putting, she is not “anti-assessment” and said the issue is that staff are rarely provided professional development or support in using assessment tools, so there’s no clear leadership or vision. To rely on data to inform decision-making, but to have no real way of monitoring and facilitating that process, is problematic because it lends itself to making decisions and judgements from a faulty foundation. The problem here is that the push for “data-driven” (Zeide, 2017, p. 164) actions and decisions replace the necessary human element needed to understand the student experience. Relying on data to make decisions and determine the best course of actions may promise “more equitable education outcomes but may inadvertently have the opposite effect in the long run” (Zeide, 2017, p. 164).

Like Fiona and Mona, Sara said her institution adopted a business model focused on financial stability and finding new streams of revenue. She associated this with the pressure “to stay relevant.” To stay relevant, Sara must demonstrate to the administration that the goals and services of her program align with the overall institutional goals. That is, in some ways she must connect student support services to the overarching agenda of how her program helps to make the institution money. Staff who serve in a similar capacity to Sara’s can position their college access programs as relevant to the institution because their programs can support overall recruitment and retention goals - both of which are tied to finances in terms of tuition dollars. To remain relevant in the market of higher education is to show your programs and services are competitive and desirable. Staff are called upon to do this by focusing on performance metrics (such as new student enrollment, and recruitment and outreach measures), which is said to align with the corporatization of higher education (Kezar et al., 2019). On the one hand, student services are supposed to focus on building community, a sense of belonging, and academic confidence. But on the other hand, make sure to translate your work to ensure you are “pleasing the university,” as Sara referred to it.

Julia, who is skilled in designing program evaluations, provided a contrasting view on the use of evaluation to support students. She discussed how staff can use data in a student-centered and effective way to influence change on college campuses that support change work. Julia said, “I have seen the use of data to be able to share stories in a way that says let’s look at it, maybe a specific population of students or, to be able to look at trends over time.” The problem is not using evaluation, data, and assessment tools; instead, it is more in how the tools are utilized. Julia explained that institutions

should provide more opportunities for people to learn about why evaluation is important, how to access it, and how to make informed decisions. She believed that it is not the nature of evaluation that makes it oppressive, it is the ways in which it is used or misused that casts it in such a way.

### ***Subtheme 3: Empowerment and Disempowerment***

Feeling empowered is connected to the ways that participants in this study lead change and build community with students and their colleagues. As Julia described: “when I think about the change work that I do, it is often and all the time, which is great for me because it's exciting.” Feeling excited and empowered to engage in change work was closely connected to the way participants described their experiences with executive leaders who embraced a social justice agenda and who provided philosophical and financial support to participate in equity focused professional development. Secondly, participants also discussed how they empowered their teams to feel confident in their roles as advocates for students and change. Institutional actors (including administration, colleagues, and other professional staff) can have a positive effect on participant engagement in change work. On the other hand, participants felt disempowered when leaders did not acknowledge student issues on campus, and when staff felt like they had to constantly help leadership understand the issues. In the context of this study, empowerment also takes the shape of knowing your purpose and values, including which values you will not sacrifice, and applying this awareness of yourself and students to build a network of colleagues who share the same purpose and espouse similar values (Meyerson, 2008).

**Experiences of Empowerment.** As a staff supervisor, Maya espouses the values of collectivism and social action to empower her staff to feel supported and valued in their role as student advocates. She described her orientation to her work as “way more candid than many of my colleagues” and characterized herself as “I’ve always been a professional who forces that or pushes that conversation”:

They [Maya’s staff] know they have the leeway to push and then come talk to me, and if somebody writes an email or says something that disagrees with their standpoint or disagrees with a policy that we've managed to put in place in our office or the way that we do our work, I will always be the person who goes to war. I just don't think that's acceptable for entry level folks to have to fight that on their own.

Maya empowers her staff by making them feel as though they have the autonomy and freedom to make decisions and speak up without having to worry about their supervisor not supporting them. She is an affirming supervisor who trusts her staff. A supportive supervisor is described by Meyerson (2008) as one of the ways to support and develop tempered radicals. Maya leans on what she named as her “political power” in her role as a campus director to stand behind and advocate for her staff when they wish to challenge or push back in meetings and other interactions with leadership. Maya’s strategy of using her political power is located in Richter et al.’s (2020) study of how tempered radicals demonstrate resistance to the neoliberal model in higher education, these individuals “disrupt patterns of oppression by leveraging our most privileged positions” (p. 10). This means that one of the strategies of tempered radicalism is to have a critical understanding of your own social identity and social location and how those

aspects of self-intersect with the ability to influence and push for change as an institutional insider. For women in higher education, this may include race, class, gender, positional authority, years of service, education level, political connections, among many other factors.

In addition to tempered radicals empowering others, some participants were also empowered by leaders committed to social justice. Alana provides an example of how leadership can empower staff. She names her current institution “as a refreshing space to be in.” She described a Black woman executive leader at her institution who personally reached out to faculty and staff to form a working group focused on practices of institutional equity. Alana described this leader as:

Very real and raw and saying we have to be ready to tackle issues of institutional systemic historic racism... [she invited us by saying] ‘if you're open to that and using that type of language, and if you are comfortable in that and making that type of stand, please join this group.’

Leaders like this woman are members of a small group of executives who are comfortable and willing to confront and talk openly about campus racial issues (Harper, 2017). Harper (2017) explains how senior leadership can address persisting issues of racism on campus by talking about and responding to racism not just in the context of a single campus incident, but instead as a systemic issue that is an accumulation of unaddressed problems, biases, and frustrations. This leadership approach is an authentic way of “confronting and correcting race problems, instead of looking for an expedient solution that merely has temporary symbolic (thereby, political) value” (Harper, 2017, p. 118). In the example of the executive Alana described, this leader led and embraced

conversations about race and racism on campus and to move her institution in the direction of racial equity goals. When staff work with leaders who are willing to have purposeful conversations about persisting structural inequities in higher education, they are more likely to feel empowered because staff see the connection between their change work and the discourse and actions of executive leadership.

Like Alana's experience, Julia described how administration can empower staff to feel valued and seen in their efforts to take on leadership roles as change agents. Julia was invited to participate in an equity-focused professional development and then asked to participate in a working group to "really look at student resources using an equity and access lens." After participating, Julia said, "We are now leading teams of people to identify where the gaps and opportunities are in different areas across the institution, like sense of belonging or financial aid." Julia's story is an example of how leadership can empower change agents by focusing on efforts that build collective actions across the institution. As Julia described, these opportunities include support to attend professional development and/or seminars, and the space to have the conversations needed to develop and implement actionable steps to address structural inequities that persist on campus.

**Experiences of Disempowerment.** But there are times within the same institution that are not as empowering for Julia. She explained that she needs to engage in "managing up" by "helping supervisors or other leaders to understand their role and influence and impact on members of their team." This weighed heavily on her, because while she is trying to grow and advance her practice, she also has to carry those along who aren't doing the same reflective and critical work. Managing up is a tactic of "sensitizing those in power to the change initiative" (Kezar & Lester, 2011, p. 230),

which involves helping leadership to understand and respond to student issues. Julia did this through coaching leadership to raise their awareness about campus issues and to also “get the buy-in from the collective.”

Her experiences with leadership, across the same institution, demonstrate how women who engage in change work experience ambivalence. Ambivalence is characterized as the positive experiences of working collectively with the institution to engage in change work (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), such as Julia’s participation in the equity centered professional development. And on the other hand, feeling burdened by the work of managing up and helping leadership understand the complexities of campus issues. Julia refers to her work as both “heavy” and feeling “excited.”

Mona also shared her perceptions of leadership that lead to feelings of disempowerment. She said, “Folks at the top aren’t listening to the issues they should be listening to.” While she recognizes that leadership manages directives and pressures from external forces - like accreditation, the state government, and other governing bodies - she emphasizes, “but the rest of us lower down know that’s not what is important.” Her frustration with leadership’s lack of attention to student issues led to feelings of not being seen and valued. Staff feel disempowered when they don’t see the connection between their change efforts and the decisions and priorities of leadership.

Many of the participants in this study discussed how they chose careers in higher education to have a positive impact on the lives of students and communities. Maya said, “I’m always on the side of who’s being left out, and that often leads you to be the person who people tend to want to leave out, because you’re the one who brings up the hard questions.” In a similar way, Mona expressed, “I am always trying to think about who are

we not serving and what should we be doing differently.” So, when administrators or colleagues “want to leave out” staff from conversations as Maya described or “aren’t listening” to important issues as Mona called it, it’s not just that staff work feels ignored, but it also represents the mental and physical toll of “banging your head against a brick wall” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 27). Participants who see the disconnect between their purpose and feeling like the administration does not want to move towards action (Ahmed, 2012), can lead to feelings of disempowerment. Berti and Simpson (2021) locate feelings of disempowerment as a product of the pervasive dynamic of hierarchical organizations and name those without assumed titles of power as subject to “implicit domination” (Berti & Simpson, 2021, p. 258). Domination is described as the systemic influence of ideology that becomes both a natural and undeniable aspect of institutions (Berti & Simpson, 2021). It is well documented that IHEs are influenced by neoliberal ideology and as a result embrace elements of academic capitalism - such as privatization and corporatization and the participation in free markets (Burke, 2020; McClure 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), all of which draws attention away from the public good model of education that faculty and staff center in their change work (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008; Kezar et al., 2013).

Leaders can empower change agents in a couple of ways: through their willingness to have conversations that intentionally address structural inequities and through convening groups of faculty and staff to advise leadership on actionable steps to support campus goals of inclusion and equitable distribution of resources. Leaders who work to build and acknowledge community across divisions are more likely to empower staff because these actions align with the public good model of education. On the other

hand, leadership who staff perceive as disconnected from the student experience and as ‘standing in the way’ of student well-being with convoluted policies and procedures are more likely to disempower staff. Even though they represent authority from within the institutions, leaders are still part of the larger neoliberal system of higher education. Some senior leaders are more skilled at resisting the pressures to conform to the corporate-like, revenue driven, and metric-based regime neoliberal model of higher education, and those are the ones who support an environment of change and critical thinking.

### **Overarching Theme Two: Strategies of Survival**

*If I come to whatever space, I’m not here to maintain, I’m here to uplift, which often leaves me feeling conflicted because not everybody wants to change, not everybody wants to have influential conversations about maximizing efforts. Maya*

### **Figure 5**

*Subthemes of Strategies of Survival*

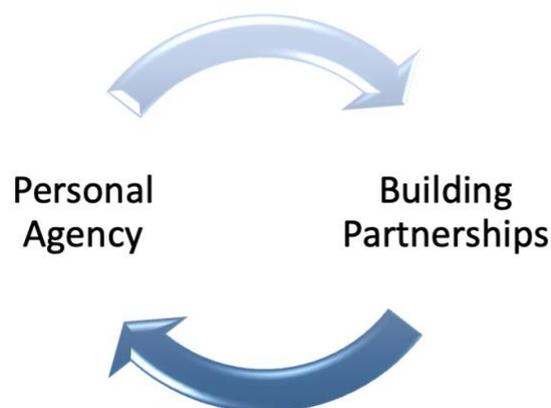


Figure 5 represents the strategies of survival described by participants as they persist in their efforts to advocate for students and influence change: (1) Personal Agency

and (2) Building Partnerships. In this study, change work was defined as the efforts of staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities. While the participants did not have official authority, as defined by holding an executive leadership position, their sense of agency and collective actions to influence change represents forms of political and personal power (Meyerson, 2008). The political and personal power of tempered radicals is in the subversive strategies they engage in and lead to challenge neoliberal ideologies of productivity, competition, and individualism (Richter et al., 2020). Individualism, which is antithetical to the public good model in higher education (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008) looks like espousing values of self-optimization, self-reliance, and making people feel judged on ideals of excellence and competition. This in contrast to the communitarian model, which highlights the ability to support community, relationships, and collective actions (Wong, 2021).

### ***Subtheme One: Personal Agency***

Participants discussed how they used their agency to resist pressures to conform, exercise control over their profession, and find community. Personal agency in this study are the personal values and beliefs that participants draw on when they take action, which includes their ability to create boundaries, and make decisions to disengage from their work.

Maya shared how she uses her agency to create boundaries.

I'm very clear about what I value and what I will and will not give on. I know what I stand for and I am comfortable saying no to people who outrank me in

position. So, if you want me to do something and I'm not okay with it, I'm like no, I'm not doing it. If you want to, ask someone else. But I'm not going to do it.

Maya does not accept compromising her values and boundaries for the institution. She is confident in saying 'no' and resisting the pressure to do work that would compromise herself or the well-being of her students - regardless of the expectations placed on her by the institution. Her personal power is in the act of aligning her values with what actions she will and will not take on for her institution. Maya locates her personal power in having a "strong reputation on campus for being a great collaborator and making things actually happen from beginning to the end, my follow through is amazing."

Similar to Maya, Mona described how she uses her agency to decide when the work she does for the institution no longer suits her personal well-being. As a self-described "grassroots leader" Mona finds her purpose in organizing community efforts. She is someone who always finds herself involved in starting committees, working groups, and conversations to support students, such as commuter, pregnant, and transfer students and so deciding to step away is a difficult choice for her. As much as she enjoys committee and/or collaborative work with colleagues, she has her limits. She said,

I've done it twice, where I've had to disengage, and it was really where I reached a point where I was hitting my head against the wall, and it was really making me feel bad.... I don't need to be personally attacked when doing my work.

Mona described a time when she was "personally attacked" in her involvement on a campus committee to support first-year students. A colleague used strong and damaging language against her. She named the amount of personal distress this interaction caused

as her “breaking point.” It was difficult for Mona to walk away because of the time she invested and the colleagues she built relationships within the process. Her decision to disengage from this work demonstrates how women who engage in change work can use their agency in making difficult decisions. On one hand this work represented her passion and purpose, but on the other hand the distress was so significant that it negatively impacted her emotional well-being. Walking away did not mean she surrendered or gave up. If she has worked to build awareness and advocate for change, the contribution, no matter how small or incremental, is there. Social action always has an unfinished agenda (Ahmed, 2012) and so Mona’s work towards change means that there are others who will continue the work and/or the cause.

Julia’s sense of agency is centered on the necessity to “find your people and understand the politics.” She is a member of an affinity group that meets monthly and describes this group as a space for community and to “talk through challenges in an open and safe space and to meet other people that you might not be able to find anywhere else on campus, because we’re all doing our respective work.” Julia’s personal strategy of finding community represents participation in a counterspace, which for student affairs professionals is “an intentionally designed, culturally affirming professional development experience that directly contributes to the personal well-being and professional success of individuals from underrepresented cultural groups.” (West, 2019, p. 162). Finding counter spaces in student affairs recognizes and strengthens both the personal and professional lives of women (West, 2019).

### ***Subtheme Two: Building Partnerships***

Participants described how they formed partnerships with students, colleagues, and external stakeholders to organize and coordinate advocacy efforts (McLendon, 2003) to support their change work and to influence policies and the classroom experience. Participant efforts to build partnerships across campus demonstrates that change work is a collective and organized effort that enlists the participation of multiple constituents. As Alana describes, there is “power in multiple voices speaking the same message.” The power Alana speaks of is described by Astin and Astin (2000) as the ability that faculty, staff, and students have to transform the institution through their individual and collective actions.

**Students as Partners in Change Work.** Building partnerships with students is located in the tempered radical literature as a way for faculty and staff to align themselves with “a group that has power on many campuses” (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 142). Sara explained that she sees her students as partners in change work, and in many ways more influential than staff. She believes that if it is always “staff who are always speaking up” then administration will not be as likely to listen and respond. Peer-to-peer learning is one way she works to enlists students in change work. She often invites her high school students to campus conversations led by student organizations focused on social justice (such as events centered on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and additional events sponsored by campus affinity groups). Sara does this because “they [the students] are learning from young minds versus us always teaching them by doing a workshop.” When students develop social connections with other students and feel a sense of shared identity, future goals, and/or aspirations, it has a positive impact on their

well-being (Hanson et al., 2016). Engaging in peer learning promotes feelings of purpose and sense of direction and leads to an increase in attributes of both self-acceptance and self-determination (Hanson et al., 2016).

She sees partnerships with students to develop their advocacy skills, and for students to “be present and in the faces of the people who are making the decisions.” She involves her students in what she calls “behind the scenes work” by including them in conversations about the nature of institutional politics, providing opportunities for students to practice voicing their opinions, and engaging in group discussion and debate about current social issues. Sara’s approach of mentoring students to develop their advocacy skills and grow as change agents is one strategy to support social change and inclusion (Broadhurst & Martin, 2019).

**Colleagues as Partners in Change Work.** The process of social change involves having partners who have a similar mindset and agenda (Meyerson, 2008). In this study, the participants often talked about their efforts to create an awareness of inequity issues on campus and how this led to finding other like-minded people who became their partners in the change work (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

Julia gave an example of how the shift to predominately online services caused by COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity to build partnerships with colleagues across the institution to reimagine student services. She explained:

There was a whole team of people that came together and are still working together, in order to rethink and reimagine what new student orientation and onboarding our first year, students, and transfer students could look like. And so, it allowed for people to meet one another, who haven't worked with one another

to understand that it really is a campus and community partnership in onboarding our students across the entire campus.

Julia discussed how staff who may not have typically worked together found a need to build partnerships so they could collectively acknowledge and respond to the impact of the pandemic on the services which welcome and orient first-time and transfer students to the institution. Julia described this work with colleagues as an opportunity for staff and their departments to think about how they can effectively support students in their transition to the institution in a predominately remote environment. The pandemic pushed institutions to address the challenges of the pandemic, such as how to increase engagement and interaction, to address issues of equity, and to be mindful of the impacts of isolation (Morgan, 2022). Julia's story illustrates how partnership work can generate ideas and new ways of engaging students through a lens of equity and access to address the issues brought on by the pandemic.

**External Stakeholders as Partners in Change Work.** Mona discussed her partnerships with off-campus services providers that she refers her students to for services, such as childcare. She said, "I want to know you and know that you're going to treat them [the students] right." She gave the example of building relationships with preschool programs and directors in the community so that she can assist students who are parents in locating childcare and educational services. She described this work as "forming connections with people that are not really in your sphere, but you feel like you need to know." Mona said she makes it a point to meet people and become involved with individuals and groups both on and off campus. She described her partnership work as something that is not in

her job description, but that she feels is necessary and in the “best interest of the students.”

Alana provided an example of how to influence change within an institution by partnering with external stakeholders to build partnerships to drive public policy that impact students on the state and/or federal level. She characterizes her efforts as “outward facing” change work that is both “exciting and invigorating.” Her institution is involved in the “larger higher ed landscape” in the state and she described her and her colleagues’ roles as:

We're making decisions about students in [state name omitted]. Let's tell you that not all students are 18-year-old straight, middle class, white students, that's a very specific experience of higher ed. Let me tell you, who is not only the growing but almost now, the majority of students, they are persons of color, and they identify themselves in a variety of ways, most are either working or low income, and they're taking care of either parents, dependents, or children. So, what does that look like in our sort of large-scale policies, and how we higher ed in the state of [omit state name] has to match how these students are experiencing it?

Alana’s efforts to drive policy are centered on upending the assumptions that some external stakeholders may have about the experience of students on their college campus. She acknowledges who the student population currently is and names their experiences and situations. This strategy of starting with the student identities and lived experiences, before getting to the point of making decisions and policies, was talked about by many of the women in this study, specifically as a practice that leadership is lacking.

Building partnerships and understanding the positions of various stakeholders is an attribute of change leaders (Kanter, 2007). Change agents like Alana are skilled in recognizing points of influence and communicating aspirations of change and inclusion to both the internal and external campus community to drive change. Communicating aspirations involves educating stakeholders on why action is needed and how their collective contributions and support can reshape a social problem, as opposed to only communicating ‘what’ is needed. It moves people to understand that “the future does not just descend like a stage set; we construct the future from our own history, desires, and decisions (Kanter, 2007, p. 56). In Alana’s case that means working with external stakeholders (such as the general assembly or state government), so they understand who students, what they are experiencing and how that needs to match the larger-scale state policies. Alana discussed the multiple layers of effectively communicating the need for change: getting to know who the actors are, what their intentions are, how to communicate with them in a way they will hear, and also how to work with those who may not be open to reshaping policy through the lens of student identity.

### **Chapter Summary**

The experiences women shared in this study help to frame the issues associated with engaging in change work in higher education. While relational work was a source of meaning and fulfillment for participants, it was also a source of emotional and invisible labor. Some participants discussed the reality of burnout in their relational work and how this related to their tendency to put their work before themselves, combined with the overall weight of responding and attending to the challenges that students and colleagues are experiencing. Participants discussed how their relational work with executive

leadership helped them to garner support and visibility for their programs, but some participants were not permitted to connect with administration because of the unwritten expectations of who staff have access to in the hierarchical structure of higher education.

Experiences of both empowerment and disempowerment surfaced as participants navigated their change work with colleagues and administration. Feeling empowered was associated with positive experiences of engaging in and leading change efforts on campus, while feelings of disempowerment led to feelings of frustration and coming up against a brick wall (Ahmed, 2012). For participants who manage teams, they sought to empower their staff by facilitating opportunities for personal development and supporting the efforts of their staff to advocate for changes which support students. The pressures of evaluation and staying relevant increased the workload of participants and diminished the value and importance of understanding what students need in the classroom and throughout campuses. Many participants were able to make gains in their change work through drawing on their personal agency and their partnerships with students, colleagues, and external stakeholders.

Chapter five will present a summary of the findings and include implications for policy and/or practice in higher education. I will also offer suggestions for future research as well as recommendations for leadership in higher education, which supports change work and an inclusive campus culture.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of women who take on unassigned leadership and advocacy roles in their endeavors to uphold the public good model of higher education and counteract the influences and pressures of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This study was guided by two research questions: (1) How do participants make sense of their experiences of change work in higher education? and (2) In what ways do participants describe their efforts to persist in their attempts to influence change?

I conducted 60-minute semi-structured interviews with six women via Zoom to address my research questions. All the women in this study had at least three years of experience in higher education, and four women had more than seven years of experience. Four out of the six women in this study identified as a woman of color. A variety of institutions were also represented in the sample, including both public and private schools, small and large-sized institutions, as well as a religious-affiliated institution, a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI), a Predominately White Institution (PWI) and a Public Ivy.

I view change work as feminist work because a feminist lens positions women's experiences and perceptions as a legitimate form of knowledge that uncovers the meaning of a social experience (Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 2015). Further, both change work and

feminist work recognize that race, class, and gender matter in how women experience influencing change within an institution. This approach helped me arrive at an understanding of how women develop and sustain relationships, how they understand the nature of higher education, and how they use their personal agency to sustain their work.

### **Chapter Roadmap**

Two overarching themes and five subthemes emerged in this study, as listed in Table 2. In this chapter I first discuss my findings by each subtheme and connect my findings to the existing literature by highlighting similarities and differences that surfaced. Next, I offer implications for practice and recommendations for leadership that supports an environment for change work. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research.

**Table 2**

*Overarching Themes and Subthemes*

Overarching Theme One: Experiences of Change Work	Overarching Theme Two: Strategies of Survival
Relational Work	Personal Agency
Pressures of Evaluation and Relevance	Building Partnerships
Empowerment and Disempowerment	

### **Overarching Theme One: Experiences of Change Work**

One of the most salient ways that participants described their role in influencing change was tied to how their personal values of justice, equity, community, and collaboration connected to their purpose of advancing agendas of change that centered on inclusion. In all of our interviews, discussion of salary, positional power, prestige, or

recognition never surfaced. Even though we were talking about ‘work’ in the traditional sense of a job that we physically attend to and are paid to perform, the content of our conversations always felt driven by the participants' purpose and passion for social action and change. I always heard a sense of fulfillment come through in their descriptions of seeing students develop throughout their academic careers: “That never gets old to me,” as Alana said. I share this observation because it grounds women’s efforts for change in collective actions that aim to benefit the community and push back against the neoliberal agendas of individualism, productivity, and the corporatization of higher education (Kezar et al., 2019; Mountz et al., 2015).

***Subtheme One: Relational Work***

While relationships and connections with the campus community were where several participants saw their values and purpose aligning with their positions, relational work also connected to experiences of emotional and invisible labor at times. To frame how women experience relational work I turned to the emotional labor literature, which predominantly focused on the experience and institutional location of faculty rather than staff (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). This study similarly found that emotional labor in higher education is both a gendered and raced experience, meaning that the work to support, mentor, and care for students is performed mostly by women and disproportionately by women of color. The findings of this study suggest that there are some differences in how faculty experience emotional labor as compared to staff. For example, Lawless (2018) describes how taking the time to mentor students, attend to their personal experiences, and show empathy added an additional burden on faculty combined with their duties to teach, research, and publish. For many of the women in this study,

their decision to choose careers in higher education was centered on the very practice of developing relationships and supporting students (Hirt et al., 2005), so the student focused interactions described by Lawless (2018) were not always as pronounced or perceived as emotionally laborious for staff. Because the role of student affairs staff is one of service-delivery that focuses on the social and psychological needs of students (Kezar & Lester, 2011), many participants described their relational work with students as an important aspect of their position. As Sara described, the nature of staff work is “to focus on the students” by understanding student identity development, as well as the student experience both on and off campus.

The emotional labor piece for staff in this study was mostly present in their interactions with colleagues and/or administration who did not espouse the same values of justice, inclusion, community, and collaboration; encounters with slow bureaucratic processes; and consistent asks for assessment and evaluation. While there was some difference among faculty and staff of how they perceive and experience emotional labor in regard to mentoring students and developing personal relationships, the experiences for staff women of color was largely the same as faculty members of color in the literature. Their emotional labor was more pronounced and connected to the times in which their values and identities were not seen or acknowledged. Like the literature on emotional labor (Goerisch, 2019; Lawless, 2018; Miller et al., 2019), invisible labor was especially present for women of color through the unwritten expectation to always serve on committees, pressures to participate in working groups, and engage in conversations to support students who identify as first-generation, low-income, and/or as a student of color. Melaku (2022) further theorized this as the “invisible tax” that women of color

experience in the workplace through the expectation to participate in both uncompensated and unrecognized labor.

Several participants also discussed the reality of burnout as a by-product of relational work in higher education. There is no singular reason as to why burnout in higher education occurs. Participants offered several reasons, such as witnessing and/or responding to the traumas experienced by students and colleagues; navigating conversations with people at the institution who do not have similar values of equity and inclusion; and, as Fiona described, “the instinct of always putting others before self.” There are multiple institutional factors which impact staff burnout, such as the changing job expectations due to the high turnover of administration, which is expected to increase in the next two years due to the instability brought on by the pandemic (Stebbleton & Buford, 2021); the pressures associated with “pleasing the university” as Sara named it; and the expectation for staff to devote “50-60 hours a week,” as Maya described. In their study of why 50% to 60% of staff in student affairs leave higher education within five years, Marshal et al. (2016) found that work-life balance was a major contributing factor. Women who seek to influence change are more likely to experience burnout because they take on additional unassigned duties, which require more of an emotional and personal investment in their work (Gorski & Chen, 2015).

### ***Subtheme Two: Pressures of Evaluation and Relevance***

Throughout all the participant stories there was a common feeling - higher education has the power to transform lives and uplift individuals, communities, and families, but the system feels clogged (Ahmed, 2017). The participants pointed to the pressures of evaluation and relevance as one of the ways that the structure and systems of

higher education sidelined the importance of student experiences. The women cited different reasons for this including, a lack of understanding of how students experience their lives and their campus; the pressure “to stay relevant” as Sara described, and the tendency to view the student experience through a narrow lens of “performance indicators” as Mona named it. The problem described by participants is that “oppressive evaluative systems” as Fiona called it, disrupts the academic and social experience for students to learn and think freely. On the one hand, student services are supposed to focus on building community, a sense of belonging, and academic confidence. But on the other hand, staff must also find ways to communicate the value of their work to ensure they are “pleasing the university” as Sara explained.

The experiences of evaluation shared by participants resonate in the academic capitalism literature in a couple of ways. First, evaluative measures in higher education mimic a market-like approach by positioning education and student services as a commodity that must produce a high profit margin to be worthy of continuation and recognition (Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Kezar et al., 2019). That is, staff must connect their work in student services to the overarching agenda of financial stability and remaining competitive in the education market (McClure, 2016). Secondly, participants connected the practices of evaluation and assessment in higher education as parallel to “a capitalist culture that wants to measure and praise the demonstration of success,” as Fiona said. This study recognizes that evaluation is a very broad term in higher education and encompasses many activities, such as assessing student learning outcomes, administering course evaluations, conducting program evaluations (of both academic and student support programs), and engaging in regional and national accreditation processes.

One way to support inclusive evaluation practices is using “culturally responsive evaluation” or CRE (Hood et al., 2015, p. 281). The CRE model is rooted in social advocacy and critical race theory and “gives particular attention to groups that have been historically marginalized, seeking to bring balance and equity into the evaluation process” (Hood et al., 2015, p. 283). This is done by evaluators first educating themselves on the culture and context of the community and then framing questions with the intention of inclusion. For example, a culturally affirming question would be centered on how well programs and services connect and/or reflect the values, beliefs, and identities of students (Hood et al., 2015). CRE in higher education looks beyond the common measures of retention and graduation rates and academic performance to understanding how students are actually experiencing their college campus. Retention rates tell us how many students come back each year, but it doesn’t offer any insight into student belonging and their overall experiences in the classroom and in campus spaces.

### ***Subtheme Three: Empowerment and Disempowerment***

Participants felt disempowered when they worked with leaders who did not prioritize how students were experiencing their campus and/or in an environment that did not allow for open communication between administration and staff. When staff perceive that administration embraces the priorities of academic capitalism, which narrowly focus on finances, performance, and competition in the higher education market, they are more likely to feel disempowered. On the other hand, when staff experience working with an administration that espouses the values of the public good model of education, such as collectivism and social well-being (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008), staff are more likely to

feel empowered. Staff who feel empowered are more likely to persist in their positions and feel as though their work is meaningful (Hirt et al., 2005).

This study found that feelings of disempowerment are tied to a philosophical difference of how to support students and a “structural divide” (Bendermacher et al., 2017, p. 49) created by the hierarchical leadership model of higher education. These philosophical differences tie back to the academic capitalist model (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), as compared to the public good model of higher education (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008). Retaining staff who are both personally and professionally committed to change work is important because they are the ones who invested in making the institution a more inclusive space for students. Part of the responsibility to retain staff also falls on the direct supervisor and their ability to mentor and provide strong leadership (Marshall et al., 2016), as well as raise awareness of how administrative practices may be disempowering for staff. Further exploration of empowerment and disempowerment would be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of how both faculty and staff perceive their relationship with administration, as well as what other institutional factors contribute to empowering beliefs in the workplace.

In comparison, empowerment plays a significant role in how likely participants are to see their institution as an affirming and “refreshing space to be in” as Alana named it. Participants who felt empowered in their role tended to work with leadership who were willing to have direct conversations about campus issues (Harper, 2017) and with leaders who facilitated opportunities for faculty and staff to come together to problem solve and make recommendations to administration. Participants also felt empowered when they had supportive relationships with colleagues and supervisors who had a similar agenda of

social change (Astin & Astin, 2000). These examples shared by participants suggest that there are some instances where executive leaders are not necessarily ‘the problem,’ but instead are the ones both leading and supporting change work. As Alana explained, “not all institutional leaders are created equal.” In a similar way, participants in this study who identified as managers and department directors took on the responsibility of empowering their team through their willingness to openly disagree with administration. In talking about her management style, Maya explained that her staff always has the “leeway to push and then come talk to me” and if anyone challenges her staff she said, “I will always be the person who goes to war.” The findings of this study suggest that empowerment is closely connected to how likely change agents are to persist and feel supported in their positions.

### **Overarching Theme Two: Strategies of Survival**

Two of the most common strategies used by participants to persist in their efforts to influence change was in their personal agency and ability to build partnerships (R.Q. 2). Both strategies are found in the tempered radicalism literature (Meyerson, 2008) and represent forms of personal and political power. The personal power of tempered radicals is located in their resistance to compromising their values, beliefs, or ideals in the name of conformity and adherence to organizational expectations (Meyerson, 2008). Their political power takes the shape of subversive strategies (Richter et al., 2020) to redirect and challenge the ways in which institutions and external stakeholders understand the student experience. For example, Alana works with external stakeholders to upend assumptions that policymakers have about traditional college students and what that means for “large-scale policies” in her state.

The theory of tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) provided one of the ways to understand how women in this study used their personal and political power to influence change in their institution. However, there were times throughout the study that women did not take on a tempered radical approach, such as when Maya refused to agree or conform with institutional processes or when Mona walked away from a highly contentious working group – neither of which are tempered strategies. This study suggests that women’s approach to change work varies depending on both the situation and context. At times, women took more of a radical approach and did not represent the strategies of adhering to conformity and supporting institutional agenda items, as discussed in the tempered radical framework (Meyerson, 2008). Women’s change work cannot be labeled as one-way, because there are numerous factors that will impact how and when women choose to conform or resist. Future studies should examine the times in which women use a tempered versus non-tempered approach, and the reasons associated with such decisions.

### ***Subtheme One: Personal Agency***

Participants shared stories of how they used their personal agency as they worked on the institution, while working for the institution at the same time (Ahmed, 2012). In this study, women worked to balance the pressures of what is required of them in their positions and at the same time advocated for change, all while recognizing their own well-being in the process. In this study, agency was centered on women’s “beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over the events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1990, p. 397). Participants described times in which they exercised this control by refusing to compromise their values and felt confident in “saying no to people who

outrank me in position” as Maya described. Maya named both her ability to create boundaries and her “political power” on campus to resist institutional pressure. Mona, despite her commitment to community organizing and her identity as a “grassroots leader,” had to disengage from her commitment to community organizing. She would periodically step away when she was “personally attacked” by colleagues or others who disagreed with the work she is doing. These were difficult decisions to make because of the amount of time and effort she had invested, but like Maya, Mona maintained boundaries of how much she allowed her work to impact her “mental health” as she called it.

Another form of agency was developing strategies to deal with the pressures of being a change agent in higher education. Julia said to “find your people and understand the politics.” Her participation in an affinity group is an example of how women in student affairs find community, challenge organizational norms, and express their experiences in an affirming environment, and protect their well-being through participation in counter spaces (West, 2019).

### ***Subtheme Two: Building Partnerships***

Participants built partnerships with colleagues, students, and the external community in their efforts to raise awareness and influence change through “power in multiple voices,” as Alana put it. Julia worked with a cross divisional group to reimagine new student services during the pandemic. Maya described how she worked with her team to not only influence change but implement a departmental policy of how to award emergency funds to students who demonstrate financial need. Because Maya and her team have a similar approach to supporting students that is centered on trust, they were

able to reimagine the ways in which students engage in the process of requesting emergency funding.

Sara's strategy of engaging students as partners in change work (Matthews et al., 2018) is a way to have students "be present and in the faces of people who are making decisions" as she said. She described that when it is only staff who are "speaking up," administration is less likely to listen and respond to concerns. Students are an influential group in holding administration accountable for addressing issues of exclusion and oppression on campus (Linder, 2019). The neoliberalization of higher education has led IHEs to embrace the tendency to view students as consumers and to rely on a hierarchical structure to make decisions and to not see students as democratic actors from within the institution (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Sara's approach disrupts this process and supports the move towards a "post-neoliberal university" (Cole & Heinecke, 2020, p. 100), in which students act as democratic actors in the governance of higher education (Matthews et al., 2018). This shift positions students as part of a democratic process in how decisions are made in relation to policies, allocation of resources (including budget, staff, and space), and overall day-to-day operations. Building partnerships is a tactic of tempered radicalism, in that these partnerships represent the ways in which women push and inspire others to join their efforts (Meyerson, 2008). Building partnerships is also a strategy to navigate the power dynamics in higher education by partnering with leaders who represent authority (Kezar & Lester, 2011) and is a way to uncover the institutional politics of how and who helps change flow. Building partnerships also reveals who represents blockage in the system (Ahmed, 2017).

## **Implications for Policy and Practice in Higher Education**

The women in this study shared their experiences and challenges associated with change work and offered their perspective of how institutions can become spaces which reflect community, belonging, and inclusion. I provide implications for practice in this section which represent some ways that leadership can support women engaged in change work, as well as a collective movement towards a more inclusive campus environment.

### ***Acknowledging Relational Work***

Relational work is often what moves people, influences processes, increases student sense of belonging, and builds community, but as Fiona explained, building relationships “does take time and does take energy and it's something that is not easily quantified in reports.” One of the implications for practice is that institutions need to recognize the reality of emotional labor for women and especially women of color. One way to do this is to acknowledge and value the amount of time it takes to develop relationships, not just with students but with people across the institution. As Lawless (2018) suggested, institutions should factor relational work into the compensation structure for faculty, and I extend this suggestion to also include staff. For example, if it is the goal of institutions to advance equity and inclusion, there should be a concerted effort to look at who is doing that work and to build that into the pay structure for staff.

Secondly, this study suggests that there may be an association between relational work and burnout. To that end, institutions should acknowledge the possibility of burnout and seek ways to support the well-being of staff. Access to a supportive supervisor or mentor, the opportunity to build community, and intentional conversations about self-care within the institutions are protective factors in preventing burnout (Gorski & Chen,

2015). As Sara described, staff often take on the personal, family, and mental health issues that students experience. In that regard, leadership should also consider access to professional development opportunities that provide staff with the skills and tools needed to support student mental health as well as their own.

### ***Reimagining Productivity and Pressures of Evaluation***

In addition to acknowledging the value of relational work and exploring options for additional compensation, leadership, in collaboration with Human Resources (or union leadership), should lead a concerted effort to critically look at whether the workload and expectations of faculty and staff are actually tied to meeting institutional goals of inclusion. Sara, Fiona, and Mona all discussed the pressures of evaluation and “pleasing the university” as Sara characterized it. These expectations subtract from women’s work with students and goals of “building of relationships and the opening the possibility for authentic questioning and disagreement” as Fiona described. If our purpose is to move toward an inclusive campus environment, then the way in which productivity is imagined needs to align with inclusion, as opposed to seeing our work as outcome based and aligning with the financial pressures of the institution. Productivity in higher education for faculty and staff typically encompasses activities such as teaching, publishing, applying for grants, engaging in evaluation processes, and aligning our work with economic gains for the institution (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). While these are essential activities in higher education, the importance of relational work with students and colleagues is missing from this model. To that end, reimagining what productivity looks like in higher education will positively impact the student experience in the classroom and across campus and the overall institutional culture.

### *Empowering Staff and Building Agency*

The findings of this study suggest that staff are more likely to feel empowered when they work for leaders who are willing to have “very real and raw” conversations as Alana named it and when staff have the opportunity to co-lead or participate in workings groups to advise leadership and “really look at student resources using an equity lens and access lens” as Julia shared. On the other hand, participants feel disempowered when they perceive that “folks at the top aren’t listening to the issues that they should be” as Mona stated or feeling like “there’s a disconnect” as Sara explained. To that end, leadership should take visible and intentional steps in acknowledging the expertise and passion that exists across campus and organize groups of faculty and staff to work collectively and develop solutions to uphold a public good model of education that is centered on inclusion and social action (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008). If leaders are truly committed to addressing structural inequities on campus, then they also must be willing to lead conversations to acknowledge and address the exclusionary history of higher education and the ways in which structural inequities persist in the everyday policies and practices of the institution. Lastly, leaders should also deliberately make the connections between strategic plans and other forms of goal setting and the campus continually reflect on the question of “how are we actionizing these things on campus?” as Alana said.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study. First, the findings of this study are based on only one 60-minute interview on the Zoom platform with six participants. More time to interact with participants would have yielded a more in-depth account of their experiences and perceptions of change work. In analyzing the data, I often felt there was

more to the women's stories than we had time to discuss. For example, I wanted to know more about how women's current change efforts evolve over time and felt like that would have provided more depth in understanding the common experiences of change work. This study is also reflective of my skill as a novice researcher and conducting interviews for the first time. When I was re-reading transcripts, I made note of times when I should have asked a clarifying question, or times when I missed the opportunity to ask participants for further explanation about their experiences

The findings of this study suggest that both change work, and the nature of higher education is compounded by a number of factors, such as state-wide politics, institution type and designation, as well as the current leadership. Due to the complex nature of these factors, this study provided a limited understanding of how women experience change work from their position within an institution. Since phenomenological practice acknowledges that our perceptions and experiences of social phenomena are constantly shifting and evolving over time, this study provides a limited understanding of the nature of change work. This study represents the experience of participants within a certain snapshot of time, and so a study conducted at different times and in different spaces may have yielded different results.

### **Implications for Future Studies**

Engaging in change work in higher education is a complex and multilayered phenomenon. The participants in this study discussed the numerous systems, structures, and personalities that factored into their experience and perceptions of their institution. In their stories are several implications for future studies that would provide a greater understanding of how change work flows within an institutional setting.

First, this study did not explore how the personal and political power and influence of participants is seen or understood by administration. It would be worthwhile to understand how the administration perceives efforts from staff to engage in change work to better assess how administration and staff can improve their collective efforts. As some participants discussed, they experienced positive relationships with administration, support from their supervisors, and felt energized by the support of executive leadership. Since this study offered only a snapshot of participants who felt empowered by leaders and experienced working with leaders who led institutional change, further research should explore additional leadership styles that empower staff. In a similar way, future studies should investigate the experiences of women who rose to leadership positions, as well as how they managed the ways in which their identity and agenda conflicted with others in executive positions and the strategies they used to influence change at all levels.

Secondly, the nuances and experiences of all evaluative practices in higher education was beyond the scope of this study. The participants experienced a significant amount of pressure to meet performance metrics and engage in an evaluative process, and so further investigation into how faculty and staff experience and perceive these practices would offer a deeper understanding of the problems, benefits and/or limitations of evaluation, as well as areas of growth for institutions.

Finally, the theory of tempered radicalism only represents one way to understand the roles and strategies used by staff to uphold the public good model in higher education. With that said, a complex system will always benefit from more than one approach. This study did not include the ways in which the radical and activist scholarship of faculty contributes to the ways in which we can reimagine higher education. Further

investigation into how faculty scholarship influences both the institution and the staff working within the institution would have provided a deeper understanding of where change originates and a wider perspective of how to facilitate change in higher education.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Consent Form

#### **Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board**

***Approval #: 2021-2178***

#### Rhode Island College

*Who are the Tempered Radical Women in Higher Education?  
Exploring the experiences and motivations of women who lead and engage in  
change work at their home institution*

You are being asked to be in a research study about how and why women in higher education engage in change work on their college campus. Change work is defined as the efforts by faculty and staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which the institution maintains systemic inequities. Participation in this study is voluntary and it is anticipated that you would be involved in one interview for a total amount of 60 minutes. You are being asked because you have identified as a woman in higher education who is engaged in change work. Please read this form and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be in the study.

Maria Muccio-Raposo is conducting this study. She is a doctoral candidate in the URI/RIC PhD program in Education and is conducting this research under the supervision of her faculty advisor Dr. Janet Johnson; she is a professor of English education at Rhode Island College.

#### Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose(s))

This purpose of this research is to understand the experience of women working in higher education who are engaged in change work on their college campus to improve the campus experience for marginalized students.

#### What You Will Have to Do (Procedures)

If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to:

- Participate in one interview via Zoom in which I will ask you questions about your experience working in higher education, how you perceive the current issues on your campus, and the work you do to make change on your campus. I will ask you about your relationship with students,

colleagues, and senior leadership. This interview will take about 60 minutes and will be recorded on the Zoom cloud.

### Risks or Discomforts

You may find that answering some questions is upsetting. We think it would be similar to the kinds of things you talk about with your colleagues and students. You can skip any questions you don't want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any time.

### Benefits of Being in the Study

Being in this study will not benefit you directly.

### You Will Be Paid (Compensation)

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study

### Deciding Whether to Be in the Study

Being in the study is your choice to make. Nobody can force you to be in the study. You can choose not to be in the study, and nobody will hold it against you. You can change your mind and quit the study at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to quit later, nobody will hold it against you.

### How Your Information will be Protected

Because this is a research study, results will be summarized across all participants and shared in reports that we publish and presentations that we give. Your name will not be used in any reports. We will take several steps to protect the information you give us so that you cannot be identified. Instead of using your name, your information will be given a code number. The information will be kept in a locked office file, and seen only by myself and other researchers who work with me. The only time I would have to share information from the study is if it is subpoenaed by a court, or if you are suspected of harming yourself or others, then I would have to report it to the appropriate authorities. Also, if there are problems with the study, the records may be viewed by the Rhode Island College review board responsible for protecting the rights and safety of people who participate in research. The information will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study is over, after which it will be destroyed.

### Who to Contact

You can ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you can contact Dr. Janet Johnson, [jjohnson@ric.edu](mailto:jjohnson@ric.edu), 401-456-8018

If you think you were treated badly in this study, have complaints, or would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about your rights or safety as a research participant, please contact the IRB Chair at [IRB@ric.edu](mailto:IRB@ric.edu).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the information above. I am choosing to be in the study "*Who are the tempered radical women in higher education: exploring the experiences and motivations of women who lead and engage in change work at their home institution*" I can change my mind and quit at any time, and I don't have to give a reason. I have been given answers to the questions I asked, or I will contact the researcher with any questions that come up later. I am at least 18 years of age.

I understand that one interview will be conducted via Zoom and that this interview will be recorded on the Zoom cloud

I \_\_\_\_\_agree\_\_\_do not agree to be videotaped for this study.

Print Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_Date:

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent:

## APPENDIX B

### Invitation to Participate

Dear Colleagues,

I am a student in the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College joint Ph.D. Program in Education. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to explore the experiences and motivations of people who identify as women who lead and engage in change work on their college campus. The purpose of this research is to understand and honor the experiences of people who identify as women who are engaged in change work. Both faculty and staff members are invited to participate.

For the purpose of this study, change work is defined as the efforts by faculty and staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities. Since this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of women who take on unassigned leadership roles, women in executive leadership positions are not eligible to participate (i.e., Academic Deans, Vice President, Provost, President).

The amount of time it will take you to complete participation is 60 to 75 minutes. If you agree to take part in this research, you will participate in one 60-minute interview via Zoom. I will ask questions that relate to your career and how you perceive your experiences working in higher education. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time throughout this study.

**If you are willing to take part in this study, please complete the following short questionnaire: [Participant Interest Form](#)**

*For questions about this study please contact:*

- Maria Muccio-Raposo, Student Researcher, Rhode Island College and University of Rhode Island Ph.D. Program in Education, [mraposo@ric.edu](mailto:mraposo@ric.edu)
- Dr. Janet D. Johnson, Principal Investigator, Rhode Island College, [jjohnson@ric.edu](mailto:jjohnson@ric.edu)

***Rhode Island College, IRB Approval # 2021-2078***

## APPENDIX C

### Google Survey Participant Interest Form

I am a student in the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College joint Ph.D. Program in Education. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to explore the experiences and motivations of people who identify as women who lead and engage in change work on their college campus. The purpose of this research is to understand and honor the experiences of people who identify as women who are engaged in change work. Both faculty and staff members are invited to participate.

For the purpose of this study, change work is defined as the efforts by faculty and staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities. Since this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of women who take on unassigned leadership roles, women in executive leadership positions are not eligible to participate (i.e., Academic Deans, Vice President, Provost, President).

The amount of time it will take you to complete participation is 60 to 75 minutes. If you agree to take part in this research, you will participate in one 60-minute interview via Zoom. I will ask questions that relate to your career and how you perceive your experiences working in higher education. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time throughout this study.

Should the information you provide support the criteria of this study, I will contact you for a one-on-one interview. Interviews will be scheduled at a time that is most convenient for you.

For questions about this study please contact:

Maria Muccio-Raposo, Student Researcher, Rhode Island College and University of Rhode Island Ph.D. Program in Education, [mraposo@ric.edu](mailto:mraposo@ric.edu)

Dr. Janet D. Johnson, Principal Investigator, Rhode Island College, [jjohnson@ric.edu](mailto:jjohnson@ric.edu)

**Rhode Island College, IRB Approval # 2021-2078**

1. **Your Name**
  
2. **Your Preferred Pronouns**
  
3. **What is your preferred method of contact?** *Please enter your email or phone number below*
  
4. **What is your current position/title?**
  
5. **Type of Position**
  - Faculty
  - Staff
  - Dual Position- both a faculty and staff member
  
6. **What is the name of the college or university where you are currently employed?**
  
7. **What is your race/ethnicity?** *(Please check all that apply)*
  - American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic or Latino/a
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - White
  - Other:

8. **How long have you worked in higher education?** *(this includes years you have worked as a graduate, teaching or research assistant)*

- Less than 3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-7 years
- More than 7 years

9. **When are you available to participate in a 60-minute interview via Zoom?**

- Standard Workday Hours (Monday-Friday)
- After 5:00pm (Monday-Friday)
- Weekends
- My Schedule Varies

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Protocol

1. Tell me what it is like to be a (insert title) at (insert name of school)?
2. When you reflect on your time working in higher education what would you name as some of the things that have changed? Or what about things that have stayed the same?
3. Follow up - What do you think that says about higher education?
4. You identify as someone who is engaged in change work, defined as the efforts by faculty and staff to advocate for programs, policies, and curriculum that they believe work against the ways in which institutions of higher education maintain structural inequities --- tell me more about the work you do that encompasses this definition of change work?
5. In what ways, if any, has your school been supportive of your work and made your efforts visible?
6. What institutional barriers have you confronted? What's worked to get past some of those barriers?
7. What about your interactions with senior leadership? If you had to pick one story that really exemplifies what it is like for you to work at (insert name of school) -- what stands out to you? and why?
8. If you think of the items listed on your job description and compare these to your everyday work, how closely would you say the two match? If not, why not?
9. What advice would you give to graduate students entering the field or other colleagues engaged in change work? What do you think they should know?
10. What about senior leadership? What should they know about the work you and many of your colleagues are trying to accomplish?

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