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Making Diversity “Everyone’s Business”: A Discourse Analysis of Institutional Responses to Student Activism for Equity and Inclusion

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Student activism has long been a mainstay on college campuses. Student activist efforts continue to demand administrative accountability around issues of equity and inclusion on campus. These movements demand engagement and support from administrators to honor the students’ experiences and efforts as well as to respect institutional commitments to advance equity and inclusion. This paper presents a case study of 1 activist movement at a large public institution. Using discourse analysis of textual data and interviews with student leaders and activists and campus administrators, we present an analysis of administrative responses to 1 student activist movement and their impact on students. We employ Ahmed’s (2012) work on institutional diversity as a conceptual framework and find that, by invoking diversity language, the administrative responses to student activists recenter majority culture, place systemic problems back on minoritized students, and create a discursive context wherein action to address activist concerns is stifled. We also present a reconceptualization of how administrators can respond to student activists seeking equity and justice for minoritized populations.

Keywords: discourse analysis, equity and diversity, student activism

We expect engagement with substantive, instead of cosmetic diversity. We expect that recruitment, retention, and graduation of students from historically marginalized communities will become a priority. We expect an emphasis be placed on the well-being of people from historically marginalized communities. We expect an emphasis be placed on a comprehensive educational experience for all students. We expect the acknowledgment and respect of surrounding communities.

A student activist group (herein referred to as ActivistU) organizing at a large public university (PU) submitted these demands to the institution’s administration during the spring of 2014. The demands were issued after ActivistU took several actions to protest recent initiatives at PU that served to erode the legacy of resistance as well as departments and programs long fought for by student activists. Each demand

included detailed explications and specific actions to be taken by the administration to demonstrate ways in which PU could immediately and concretely work toward addressing current injustices.

ActivistU’s actions and demands fall amid similar movements across the country inside and outside institutions of higher education. Black Lives Matter, a national movement sparked after the 2012 acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, gained attention for their actions addressing systemic racism and anti-blackness particularly in the criminal justice system (Black Lives Matter, 2012). In October of 2015, a student activist group, following a series of high profile racist incidents on campus, issued a list of demands to the University of Missouri calling for an increase in the number of Black faculty, funding for the hiring of mental health practitioners of color, among other things (Concerned Student 1950, 2015). In November of 2015, a graduate student and member of Concerned Student 1950 (2015) began a hunger strike demanding the system president’s resignation (Serven & Vandelinder, 2015). Several days later, both the system president and the chancellor of the University of Missouri resigned as the publicity of Concerned Student

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1950's (2015) actions continued to grow. Protests at Yale in November of 2015 (Shapiro, 2015; Worland, 2015), extensive demands issued to the Oberlin College administration from the Black Student Union in December of 2015 (Urbanik, 2015), and Duke's Latinx student organization's January 2016 decision to cease collaborations with admissions until a list of demands are met (Mi Gente, 2016) are more examples of students engaged in collective organizing to challenge structural violence on their campuses. As a student participant in our study notes, "this is happening all over in a ton of different universities. [The administration] should be prepared for it. Conversations like this are happening all over the country, which tells us there's something systemically wrong." These student movements, like ActivistU, are demanding of their administrations much needed resources and support to combat the institutionalized racism and other oppression that stem from historical realities, and they are continuing a long, rich history of student resistance (Broadhurst, 2014).

Student activist efforts have long been a mainstay within institutions of higher education across the world (Broadhurst, 2014; Rhoads, 1998). While organizing efforts have been present throughout the history of the United States, the 1960s mark the rise in activism centered on issues of identity; thus prompting the proliferation of equity movements throughout the country. For example, the first ethnic studies programs in the United States resulted from the longest student protests in history (Umemoto, 1989). Additionally, the impetus for the creation of cultural centers primarily came from grassroots student movements and protests beginning in the 1960s and 1970s (Patton, 2010). The first institutional spaces to provide services for specific minoritized¹ populations in higher education were established in 1971 at the University of Michigan in response to social justice movements of the time (Bazarsky & Sanlo, 2011). These spaces represent the beginning of the institutionalization of these movements within higher education and mark important spaces not only for the continued promotion of access and equity for minoritized students on college campuses, but also as spaces that have the potential to foster student activist movements aimed at changing the structures and systems of exclusion and injustice.

College students across the United States protest war; corporate takeovers; the persistence of poverty, violence, and bigotry; and policies and practices that contribute to continued environmental degradation. In addition, student activists fight to make higher education accessible to a greater number of minoritized populations. Student activism has historically fought for this inclusion as well as the institutionalization of support systems, resources, and academic departments to ensure the success of minoritized students and disciplines that center the experiences of marginalized peoples (Kezar, 2010; Messer-Davidow, 2002; Rhoads, 1998). These protests are, by and large, a reaction to the realities that come with the institutionalization of once grassroots student movements. To be sure, as "diversity" becomes a part of the institution, it becomes in service to the institution (Ahmed, 2012) and while diversity language may have been adopted in institutional messaging, actions to support these messages may not occur. Continued protests may reflect how institutional values are misaligned with what actually constitutes justice for oppressed students and other campus community members given their continued presence on campuses across the United States.

In this paper, we show how student activism calls out the misalignment of stated institutional values and messaging about diversity with institutional actions and initiatives. Further, we address how responses to student activism continue to reflect this misalignment. Finally, we address how student leaders and activists perceive administrative responses to student activism. More specifically, we answer the following questions:

- (How) did administrative responses to ActivistU's actions conflict with stated institutional values of equity and diversity at one large public institution?
- How did student leaders and activists perceive administrative responses to ActivistU's actions?

¹ "Minoritized students" in our usage is informed by Benitez's (2010) explication, "refer[ring] to the process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization" (p. 131). That is, minoritized students have experienced systemic exclusion from higher education, and the usage of this term shows that this exclusion is both historically situated and institutionalized.

We found that institutional responses to ActivistU reinforced the university's history of deploying nonperformative statements (Ahmed, 2012) to assert their support for equity and diversity. The impacts of these responses are a recentring of majority culture by deflecting the problems articulated by ActivistU back on minoritized students, expecting their conformity to institutionalized processes for advancing diversity work already shown to be ineffective.

These findings draw attention to the work of scholars who assert the importance of fostering an activist-friendly environment on college campuses (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Martin, 2014). These findings also suggest that administrative responses to student activists that run counter to institutionally espoused missions and values may have adverse consequences for minoritized students and their identities. Finally, these findings signify that scholars' (Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron, 2008; Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005) assertions of the value of communication and collaboration between student activists and administrators may not be useful if administrators' actions are antithetical to student demands for accountability; justice; and expanded, legitimated ways of being for minoritized students.

Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framing

Several recent studies have examined various aspects of student activism on campus; however, no study has examined the discursive framing of administrators' responses to student activism, how these responses either align with or work against espoused administrative values, and how these responses impact the perceptions of campus for minoritized students. While studies exist that call for the collaboration between students and administrators (e.g., Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005) and that examine collaboration between faculty, staff, and student activists (Kezar, 2010), our study seeks to explore the underlying impact of such collaborations using a case study of a student activist group seeking justice for minoritized students by directly challenging the administration on policies, practices, and inaction that created a hostile climate.

Student activism has always been a fixture of campus life. From protests of the early restrictions of *in loco parentis* (Broadhurst, 2014;

Rhoads, 1998) to the current prison divestment movement (Joseph, 2015), students have long fought for their own rights and liberation (Gonzales, 2008), to shape their college campuses (Rhoads, 1998), as well as for the betterment of the social world around them. For example, Gonzales (2008) credited "the current anti-immigrant climate" as a "critical factor" in Latino students' activism (pp. 229–230). To be sure, when minoritized students "unite to change their environments, they are continuing battles that have existed for generations" (Broadhurst, 2014, p. 12).

More recently, higher education scholars have examined the positive outcomes for students resulting from their participation in student activist movements (Gaston-Gayle, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2004; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Tsui, 2000). For example, Kezar and Maxey (2014) found that student activist partnerships with faculty, staff, and administrators can lead to student learning about the democratic process and active citizenship. Also, Biddix (2014) found that participation in political demonstrations positively affects students' value of involvement in social and political issues and develops their civic mindedness.

In addition to exploring student outcomes resulting from activism, higher education scholars have examined the relationship between higher education institutions and their actors (e.g., administrators, faculty, and staff) and student activists (Case, Kanenberg, Erich, & Tittsworth, 2012; Kezar, 2010; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Ropers-Huilman et al. (2005), in their analysis, found that students characterize administrators as gatekeepers, antagonists, supporters, and absentee leaders, but not collaborators. The authors also found that student activists wanted more involvement in efforts to improve their campuses and greater access to administrators to make that happen. When faculty/staff and student collaborations around activist efforts are realized, Kezar (2010) found that important student development happens through everyday, mundane tasks associated with faculty/staff and student partnerships in activism such as the fostering of ongoing mentoring relationships, cosponsoring events or discussions, and educating students on the language of those in leadership positions. From these studies, it is clear that myriad positive outcomes stem from supporting student activ-

ism on campus although, as Kezar (2010) pointed out, cultivating a culture of dissent often cannot be a systematic, institutionalized process. Rather, it may be important for institutions to capitalize on the learning opportunities that arise when student activists mobilize on campus by fostering a culture where activists feel safe, heard, and able to get support from faculty and staff on campus.

Among the gains made by students protesting for the inclusion of minoritized students are the establishment of cultural centers (Patton, 2010), the inclusion of “diversity” in university mission statements, the hiring of high-level administrators focused on equity and diversity, and the establishment of ethnic and women’s studies departments (Umemoto, 1989). This has allowed institutions to tout their support of diversity, making “diversity” and support for minoritized students institutionalized, or folded into the fabric of institutional life.

Ahmed (2012), in her work on diversity practitioners in higher education, described diversity work as a “banging-your-head-on-the-brick-wall job” (p. 26). Drawing on interviews with diversity practitioners, she provided an account of the ways in which “diversity” is deployed in higher education as an institutional practice. While her work is more complex and nuanced than can be presented here, elements of her argument provide relevant framing for our analysis. First, Ahmed explained that often, institutions only support diversity work inasmuch as it aligns with previously espoused institutional values such as “engagement” and “commitment to excellence,” terms that remain ill-defined and contested. In this way, “diversity” gets folded into the fabric of the institution merely through the addition of language and without any underlying shifts in institutional actions or culture. Next, Ahmed described diversity language as being “non-performative,”² that is the language does not produce what it names. As such, Ahmed showed how diversity language can be a way institutions can avoid acting to support diversity initiatives. Finally, Ahmed showed how diversity language creates an avenue through which institutions can frame accusations of racism (or other forms of oppression) as injurious to the institution and therefore deploy an “institutional therapy culture” wherein diversity language can be used to reassert a commitment that is not backed up by action, recenter majority culture, and place the onus for solving institutional problems on minori-

tized communities when they experience individual incidences.

Here, we rely on Ahmed’s (2012) findings to support our analysis of institutional reactions to student activist efforts at one institution. Specifically, we use Ahmed’s arguments to frame our findings and show how her theory of diversity as “public relations” versus “a narrative of repair” plays out at PU (p. 17). Ahmed argued that diversity work exposes the proverbial “brick wall” that represents the limits of institutional transformation. In our case study, we discuss how a student activist group exposed one institution’s transformation limits, how administrators reinforced these limits, and the influence these actions had on student leaders and activists. Further, our research design allows us to deconstruct how diversity was deployed at PU and offer instances where transformation limits can be overcome when student activists are mobilized for change.

In this study, we use the assumptions that undergird critical theory to frame our findings. More specifically, we understand that thought is mediated by socially and historically constituted power relations, that language constitutes subjectivity, and that we exist in a hierarchical social world where some groups hold privilege over others (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Our interest is to explore how administrative responses to one student activist movement work to reinforce hierarchies on campus and influence student perceptions of their institution in particular ways. Additionally, in the tradition of critical theory, we approach this study through an emancipatory lens. That is, our intent as researchers is to explore better administrative responses to student activism that mitigate hierarchy and move toward an environment that honors and legitimates the experiences of minoritized students.

Method

Our data come from a larger action research project that evaluated the efficacy of communi-

² In defining nonperformative, Ahmed (2012) asserts that this language promoting diversity is “not a failure of intent or even circumstance” (p. 117), but in naming these ideas administrators may “take [them] up as if they are performatives” despite not identifying any concrete actions or strategies that operationalize these values (p. 117).

cation between student leaders and administrators after a contentious physical space redesign process initiated by the institution. Following Jones, LePeau, and Robbins (2013), we engaged in a critical analysis of this data set to “critique the normative practices” guiding administrative responses to student activism (p. 217). Our current project seeks to identify how administrative responses to a student activist movement conflict with stated institutional values of equity and diversity, and how students perceived these responses. We chose an intrinsic case study design (Stake, 2005) for several reasons including that student activist movements are often long processes, and case study methodology allowed for us to study this process in-depth using data from multiple sources including, interviews with students and administrators; campus-produced documents, advertisements, and articles; and publicly available communications between student activists and administrators. Further, we use intrinsic case study due to the specificities inherent in a unique student activist movement. Here, we are chiefly concerned with examining how administrative responses to student activists reflect or conflict with institutional commitments to diversity and articulated support for minoritized students. We hope that these findings, while unique to the particular context, can provide insight into the ways in which administrative responses to student demands for justice can exacerbate already existing tensions as well as the ways in which they can be helpful.

Situating the Study

Because we used an intrinsic case study design, it is necessary that we provide the context for our data. Our data come from one large Public University. In 2010, students from the student fee allocation committee contested the “fairness” of the cultural centers’ physical space allocation in PU’s student union. Nine student-led and student-run cultural centers historically occupied 67% of the space on a single floor of the student union. These cultural centers operate as registered student organizations without the professional staffing common in the structure of most cultural centers (Renn, 2011). PU currently has over 900 registered student organizations and previously, only 29 (including the nine cultural centers) occupied space in the student union.

Responding to the challenge from the student fee allocation committee, the chief student affairs officer recommended a redesign of the student union that included a reconfiguration of the cultural center spaces, and a process through which the cultural centers must “justify” their use of the physical space, through a biannual application, a lease with several stipulations on use of the space, and a presentation for administrators highlighting their past and future use of the space. The administrative initiation of the redesign process prompted ActivistU to form to protest perceived injustices perpetrated through the redesign.

ActivistU continued their efforts organizing for change issuing a list of demands in 2014 outlining several instances where stated institutional commitments to diversity were not upheld in practice. ActivistU called for several meetings with upper level administrators at PU to discuss the demands and, when not addressed fully, occupied the president’s office and were later arrested for trespassing. Though several change initiatives were implemented as a direct result of student organizing efforts, ActivistU has continued to advocate for access and equity for minoritized student populations.

Data Sources

Data were pulled from a variety of sources and institutional publicity outlets including online, print, and transcripts of public conversations. Several administrators sent all-campus e-mails describing policy changes that were a result of ActivistU’s actions, and these e-mails were collected and utilized as data for the case study. Data were also pulled from the student-maintained website and blog for ActivistU. These sources are all available publicly online. In addition, data come from semistructured interviews with student leaders, student activists, and administrators at PU. Interview participants were recruited through directed e-mails to all institutionally documented student leaders. A total of seven interviews were completed with students, all of whom held leadership positions with student organizations supporting minoritized students. Further, three students identified themselves as part of the efforts of ActivistU in addition to their student leadership position while two other students indicated sup-

port for ActivistU's efforts despite not being directly involved with the group. Finally, interviews were requested and granted with both the chief student affairs officer and the chief diversity officer. Interviews were one-on-one and audio recorded; each lasted approximately 1 hr and was transcribed verbatim.

We utilized several strategies Merriam (1998) recommends to ensure trustworthiness and demonstrate reliability in our methods for this case study. First, we engaged in member checking for our interview data by providing each participant a copy of their interview transcript for review and correction. Next, we utilized multiple sources of data to capture the complexity of the case as thoroughly as possible (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Throughout our analysis, we consulted regularly in order to discuss agreements and disagreements in our findings, which resulted in mutually agreed upon, and more nuanced, interpretations of our data (de Beaugrande, 1985). Finally, we consistently interrogated our positionalities and biases as researchers and members of PU's campus community in order to clarify and present any assumptions we may have engaging in this research (Merriam, 1998).

Researcher Positionality and Intent

We both approach this work from the position of higher education researchers rather than as administrators. Although we both previously held administrative positions in higher education, neither of us have occupied a high-level administrative position like those referenced in this study. In addition, we both navigate the world, and higher education institutions, from minoritized identities. Our intent in pursuing this research is not to vilify an institution or administrators. However, as critical scholars, we believe it necessary that attention be paid to the underlying effects of institutional messaging and administrative action, especially as these work to sustain hegemonic norms and ways of being. Further, as educators, we find it a professional imperative to support students as they speak their truths, coconstruct knowledge, relay cogent critique, and exercise agency. As such, we approach this work as supporters of nonviolent activism that works toward accomplishing the above.

Analytic Process

Data analysis occurred in two phases, which occurred nearly simultaneously. The first phase included the discourse analysis of textual data using theoretical tools outlined by Gee (2014). Specifically, we use the tools of social languages, the language used to convey particular identities, practices, or activities; situated meaning, the meaning language creates and conveys in particular contexts; and figured worlds, or the larger "scripts" that organize our social worlds. The first phase of data analysis included three steps. First, textual data were coded using a line-by-line analysis, employing our research question as a guide to identify broad themes in the text and descriptive and interpretive codes were assigned to the data as analysis proceeded. During the second step of our discourse analysis, each code was reexamined and read in comparison with other texts as well as alone in order to create several broader categories. For example, codes of "prestigious," "progressive," and "equitable" used by institutional messaging to describe the university were organized under the categorical heading of "Institutional Identity," which contained data that described how the institution (and its senior level administrators) defined itself. A figured world of "antagonism" arose during data analysis, which framed PU administrators as antistudent activists; while a second figured world emerged asserting "unwavering support" for equity and diversity. As a final process, each category was read with and against the figured worlds describing PU's institutional identity. This analytic process allowed for the examination of how the discourse surrounding student activists on campus defined the situated meanings of equity and diversity.

In concert with the discourse analysis of textual data, interview data were systematically coded according to the norms of basic qualitative inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A line-by-line analysis was performed and codes were generated inductively. Second, we employed a reconstruction of these codes using the themes present in the discourse analysis as guides to understand if and how these themes were taken up in the interviews. This allowed for the codes generated through discourse analysis to be used as a lens for the interview data. For example, the codes "feelings of betrayal" and "frustration"

were read against the data categorized as “institutional values” and “institutional actions” that emerged during discourse analysis. This process highlighted the incongruence between PU’s stated values and actions and the experiences students conveyed during their interviews. Finally, we returned to all of the data collected in order to explore how the themes identified aligned with the conceptual framework.

Findings and Interpretations

Using Ahmed’s (2012) work on the institutionalization of diversity efforts in higher education to frame our results, we outline four examples of institutional responses to ActivistU’s actions. Our analysis shows that institutional responses to ActivistU’s student activism on campus often produced a climate for diversity that directly countered espoused institutional and departmental values. Instead, these responses demonstrate how the institution deploys nonperformative language to assert ill-defined commitments to minoritized populations, center whiteness and other majority cultures, and devalue students and their contributions to the campus environment. Most student leader participants indicated in their interviews and through their activism that they understood the institution was acting to reinforce the status quo while some student leaders situated themselves within the institutionalized discourses of diversity on campus, believing that the actions of ActivistU were in the disinterest of minoritized students at PU. In the following sections, we show how PU administrative responses to student activism undermine institutionally espoused values surrounding diversity on campus, supporting Ahmed’s (2012) work. Evidence representative of how students either take up or resist these discourses and how findings of the discourse analysis are supported by students’ lived realities are also presented.

“Action and Not Just Word”

Many of the texts authored by administrators and analyzed in this data set direct readers to existing documents regarding equity and diversity to demonstrate the ways in which the institution is committed to ongoing diversity efforts. For example, after several organized protests and subsequent inaction by administrators, Ac-

tivistU issued a list of demands to the PU administration that outlined discriminatory policies and practices on campus including space allotted to campus cultural centers, racialized crime alerts, and the lack of gender neutral restrooms on campus. One of ActivistU’s demands stipulated,

We demand the university redefine its commitment to “diversity” in a manner that always includes historically marginalized communities; that it be transparent and state who it means by “diversity” in all of its communications concerning this issue, and that it honor the commitments it has made to these communities. That is, if it states that the following communities *embody* diversity . . .

- People of color, including underrepresented groups and new immigrant populations
- People with both visible and invisible disabilities
- People who identify as women
- People of various gender and sexual identities and expressions
- First-generation students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds”;

then it must serve and support them in action and not just word. (emphasis in original)

In response, PU’s president issued a letter pointing readers to one of the institution’s equity and diversity documents, published in 2007, which states,

In proposing a transformational framework, we are defining diversity as not only a driving force but also a *necessary condition for excellence*. We are saying that excellence is truly achievable only in an environment that fully supports engagement with diverse cultures and perspectives. An academy of the highest stature, as measured against ideals of both academic excellence and social justice, is *one in which excellence and diversity are inextricably intertwined*—not either-or, but both-and. (emphasis added)

In addition, the president echoes this document several times in communications with ActivistU stating, “we cannot be an excellent institution without being a diverse institution.” These passages, consistent with Ahmed’s (2012) work, reaffirm that the adoption of diversity language into the institution gains more traction when it is coupled with a historically espoused value (excellence), which, too often, remains undefined. This statement is consistent with Ahmed’s description of “non-performative” language in that it does not bring into effect what it describes. Here, ActivistU demands the administration fill their previously unfulfilled commitments with substantive action and the

administrative response is to direct students back to the promises of their commitment to “diversity” and “excellence.” Further, by reasserting the institution’s commitment to diversity by referencing the 2007 statement, the president dismisses ActivistU’s demands by deflecting the problems ActivistU articulates back to minoritized communities insinuating PU is putting forth its best efforts despite renewed criticisms.

Missing from the 2007 equity and diversity framework cited above, and from institutional assertions of excellence across the university, is how “academic excellence” is delineated and defined. In fact, this passage makes a distinction between academic excellence and social justice implying that they are separate and unique concepts thus removing possibility that academic excellence might include or be representative of social justice. While this passage does make clear that engaging with “diverse cultures and perspectives” is a prerequisite to excellence, it does not indicate what is entailed in that engagement. Does diversity serve merely as a demographic challenge or is it an approach to an inclusive and affirming environment? In this way, the university and the president’s response pay lip service, through a document penned eight years previously, to real and concrete demands from current student activists. Given the institutional hierarchy that requires students to engage with administrators in order to affect social change on campus (Rhoads, 1998), this lip service further reinforces the power dynamics that effectively keep students from gaining traction with those in power to create meaningful change. Further, directing student activists to preexisting documents as a response to their current demands reinforces the value of and need for deinstitutionalizing social change efforts on campus.

Student leaders and activists, in both their comments and testimonials gathered during ActivistU’s public forums for students to voice concerns regarding PU’s administration, articulate how the institution’s nonperformative commitments to diversity directly influence their lived realities. For example, ActivistU demanded PU implement a concrete plan for increasing the population of students of color on campus and adequate funding and aid to support these students. The president’s response letter identifies an existing workgroup and current efforts and practices surrounding the recruit-

ment of students of color. In response, one student states,

This issue brings up a lot of emotions for me. I’m the only Hispanic student . . . in my doctorate program, so I’ve lived this “outreach” firsthand. I was recruited under false pretenses and allegations of abundant funding, support, and an underlying commitment to diversifying my program. I later realized that I was my program’s attempt to diversify . . . I’m not one to cower and retreat, but understandably I am physically, mentally, and emotionally worn out.

This student relays one way in which nonperformative commitments to diversity impact students’ lived realities. In particular, this student shares their health is suffering as a result of being a minoritized student at PU, indicating very real consequences students attributed to administrative inaction surrounding issues of diversity and equity.

“Everyone’s Ongoing Responsibility”

The activist leaders in our case study initially pursued preexisting channels for student dissent before engaging in protests, sit-ins, and issuing the list of demands. For example, one participant—a student leader in ActivistU—discussed attending the university president’s “open office hour,” held sporadically throughout the academic year, only to be met with a long line of students and no chance to relay concerns to top administrators. A different participant shared several unsuccessful attempts to invite PU staff members to meet with her student group. Because the group operates as a collective, they only make decisions during collective meeting times which were after traditional business hours. Securing commitments from staff members to attend evening meetings proved difficult, and limited opportunities to have this student group’s concerns heard or addressed. Their efforts to follow university sanctioned practices to implore PU administrators to be responsive to their questions and concerns were ineffective. These anecdotes suggest that the institution is able to demonstrate efforts and opportunities to hear students’ grievances while simultaneously avoiding engagements with students that might challenge their authority. Power is reinforced as student frustration builds.

Further reifying existing power dynamics inherent within many higher education institutions, the president’s response letter to ActivistU’s list of demands outlined institutional

efforts for the promotion of equity. These efforts ignore that students occupy a relatively powerless position within the institutional context. The president wrote:

I am committed to making issues of campus climate and diversity *everyone's business*. It is everyone's ongoing responsibility to make equity and diversity a core element of campus life. For some this responsibility has been embraced, while for other units and individuals, the learning is at an earlier developmental stage. We must continue to work with all our faculty, students, and staff in these efforts, and our leadership team is committed to doing so. (emphasis in original)

While we agree that diversity should indeed be “everyone’s business,” the degree of responsibility to engage with these issues based on institutional position is ignored in the president’s message. By placing the onus on all parties within an institution to further equity, the very real power differentials present in this institutional hierarchy are erased. Further, by asserting this point to a group of student activists actively fighting for their own liberation in a system that historically and systemically has placed their needs, experiences, and success at the bottom ignores the realities of institutional life, namely who has the decision-making power. The president’s statement also disregards and fails to acknowledge the students’ written demands and performances of activism (Pasque & Vargas, 2014) as efforts to make equity and diversity issues on campus their “business.” Specifically, ActivistU’s work to speak out on the instances where the university did not fully meet the commitments outlined in the 2007 statement is a demonstration of the ways they have embraced their “responsibility to make equity and diversity a core element of campus life.” ActivistU’s demands and subsequent pleas to the administration to prioritize issues vital to the persistence and health of minoritized student populations exemplify the power differentials between students and administrators. It is the administration expecting minoritized students to do the, largely uncompensated, work of advancing equity even though administrators are primarily responsible for instituting institutional change through policy implementation and resource allocation.

This emphasis that diversity be “everyone’s business” places a burden of labor to research, propose, and sometimes implement changes on campus unfairly on minoritized students. For

example, in a conversation with ActivistU, the president of PU addressed the demand to hire more faculty members in ethnic studies by stating, “I would encourage you to talk to [the dean of the college] and make these elements that are important to you important to him.” Here, the president delegates the work of a proposal to advance equity within the institution to *unpaid students* rather than assign it to a paid administrator or take up the task himself thereby deflecting the problems ActivistU articulates back to minoritized communities. His recommendation undermines the espoused institutional prioritization of work to advance equity by refusing to funnel resources into the hiring practices that may increase diversity and inclusion on campus. By forcing uncompensated students to advocate for their own health and wellness in a system that is by and large stacked against them, the administration is again acting incongruently to their stated values.

Student activists echo this argument in their comments, discussing how reassertions of nonperformative commitments to diversity and dismissals of student activist concerns affect their lives. For example, a student leader in ActivistU, discusses administrative responses to their activism,

[Activists are] angry at the administration that is just nonresponsive . . . the fact is that there are [student] groups . . . who have been asking for the university to take steps on key issues for their communities for years . . . these are communities who continually are silenced and their concerns are not taken seriously . . . we’ve been talking about these things for years, about what we need for our communities to be here . . . and they keep ignoring us, we are going to go and we’re going to interrupt stuff and we’re going to yell because then you’ll have to listen.

Here the student discusses how the continual reliance on nonperformative diversity language led ActivistU to organize. This articulation shows the ways in which students believe demands can prompt the administration to move from nonperformative statements to action in support of minoritized students.

“Getting Caught Up in Minutiae”

In order to diffuse the aforementioned power dynamic, which students articulated multiple times in communication with administrators, members of ActivistU requested that a planned meeting with institutional leaders be held at a community center, a short drive from the cam-

pus student center instead of on campus. Administrators refused. While the institution touts its commitment to inclusivity, equity, and diversity, administrative responses to a request meant to foster the inclusion and safety of minoritized students and other community members whose voices are not often heard or taken seriously within the walls of the institution were not met. In a conversation between administrative leaders and ActivistU students, an administrator responding to the request to meet off campus asked:

Are we not building relationships and partnerships? We're talking about campus climate, we are on this campus to have these conversations, so I think [meeting on campus] is a fair response and I think we have to be specific about what the issues are and not get caught up in minutiae. I think meeting on campus versus off campus is minutiae, it doesn't speak to the issues that have been brought up by [ActivistU] and that's where I'm at on that.

Here, the administrator's response serves to reinforce the power dynamics by requiring students defer to the administration. Further, students' cogent request to create a more inclusive environment for themselves and other community members by holding the conversation on more neutral ground is dismissed. By labeling ActivistU's request as "minutiae," this statement effectively belittles the students and goes against the institutional rhetoric about the value placed on inclusivity.

Further, ActivistU's request to meet off campus is another example of how an administrative action could be used to create real change surrounding diversity efforts. Moving the meeting off campus could be a way to decenter the institution, and therefore whiteness and majority culture, perhaps allowing access for those often silenced within institutional walls. One leader in ActivistU articulates this in her discussion of public forums often hosted by PU administrators stating, "when you have a public forum the assumption is that you're coming in with equal amounts of power and that's not the case and, in creating that neutrality, you're already privileging a voice that's consistently privileged." By moving a forum off campus, perhaps the privileging of certain voices can be altered by the physical location, exemplifying a further way administrators at PU could move from nonperformative diversity statements to concrete action.

"Much More Subjective"

Another example of administrative responses to ActivistU actions countering espoused institutional values surrounding equity and diversity is found in the announcement to amend the racialized crime alerts sent via all campus e-mail in compliance with the Cleary Act. One demand from ActivistU was to end the use of racial descriptors in alerts sent to the entire campus regarding crime on or around campus. These alerts typically are sent shortly after campus police are alerted to a crime and often reveal only the race and gender of the perpetrator with no other significant descriptors. These alerts serve to perpetuate racial profiling and discrimination, particularly toward young men of color. Responding to ActivistU's demands, the administration adopted policy to limit the use of racial descriptors if there was not any further identifying information regarding the suspect description. An all campus e-mail sent by the senior administrator responsible for campus safety stated:

By one very important measure, our community *is* safe, or at least significantly safer than it was a year ago. Robberies on and near campus have declined over the last year, in no small part due to the university's efforts to increase police patrols, enhance lighting and building security, and expand late night transportation options. . . . Also, students, faculty, and staff are much more educated and aware and have effectively taken increased responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others. But the second puzzle piece, whether our community *feels* safe, is much more subjective and personal. (emphasis in original)

Here, the administrator is referencing the perceptions of safety that were relayed to her by communities of color on campus. Dismissing the perceptions of students of color as merely "feelings," the statement ignores the very real damage that racial profiling has on communities of color including the disproportionate amount of citations, arrests, and police brutality perpetrated against these communities (Meehan & Ponder, 2002). Further, Ahmed (2012) outlines how diversity as a "technology of excellence" works to disconnect diversity work from historic injustices that have led to existing inequities. Here, even after PU took concrete steps to directly address ActivistU's demands, activist efforts were reduced and further disconnected from historically situated and systemic injustices that continue to play out on campus. The work done via demand of ActivistU to

limit racial descriptors in crime alerts is undermined by failure to name and acknowledge the structural violence perpetrated against students of color.

Discussion

Our analysis reveals, in concert with Ahmed's (2012) conclusions, how the values of equity and diversity are only considered inasmuch as they support other institutional values such as "commitment to excellence." This nonperformative language operates to recenter majority culture and deflect problems back to minoritized students who have relatively little power in the institutional context. Administrative responses to ActivistU's demands for greater engagement with issues that directly impact minoritized students included pointing students to documents already in existence and a dismissal of student activists' requests and experiences. Discourse analysis and interviews demonstrate how administrative responses to ActivistU's efforts as well as implemented policy and practice, create an environment that is inconsistent with stated institutional values of equity and diversity.

Given the inconsistencies uncovered in our case study, we wonder what possibilities were lost for both students and the institution in the ways that PU's administration responded to ActivistU. Recognizing the opportunities for student development that Kezar and Maxey (2014) identify via collective action, we ask: Can student activism (especially action that challenges institutional policies and practice) be respected and appreciated as a developmental opportunity for *institutions* to better realize their commitments to equity and diversity? ActivistU's demands pointed to several issues not addressed by the PU administration that directly impact the lives of minoritized students. For example, months after ActivistU demanded that the campus "[p]olice [d]epartment eliminate racialized crime alerts," the public safety office implemented new policies. While this change was not attributed to ActivistU's actions, it represents how the institution might better realize their commitment to equity and inclusion by listening and responding to the demands of student activists.

Further, we question how the institution might engage with student activists in ways that honor their experiences and viewpoints. The PU administration neglected to recognize student resistance as an exercise of cultural capital. Yosso (2005)

defines resistant capital as "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color" (p. 80). Many minoritized people understand that, in order to be heard, they have to speak loudly and create different channels for communication. Often, administratively sanctioned avenues for change are not accessible or prove ineffective. Our analysis shows that ActivistU students attempted to address administrators through "proper" channels only to be met with inaction on the part of the administration. Kezar and Maxey (2014) discuss approaches to support student activists in "navigating complex institutional hierarchies" to bolster student learning and collective benefit toward their agenda (p. 35), strategies PU administrators may have employed to produce more beneficial outcomes for students. Further, to foster a culture of respect for minoritized students and their experiences, PU's administration might have recognized student activism as an exercise of leadership and responded in ways that honor that risk, urgency, and commitment.

By reframing student activism as an exercise of leadership or cultural capital in their responses to ActivistU, the administration also may have better supported their values of diversity and equity. For example, an admission by PU's president that the commitments to diversity and excellence outlined in the 2007 framework document referenced in response to ActivistU's demands were not yet fully realized may have indicated a respect for the lived realities of minoritized students and their viewpoints surrounding if and how equity is being supported by the administration.

In addition, we ask, what are the intersections of academic excellence and social justice and how do we explore, celebrate, and advance those ideas given the administrative, public relations, and legal challenges institutions often face? We believe a core consideration every administration should grapple with is how their actions will influence those students who are struggling to find a place on campus, those for whom our institutions were not built. Noting the recent decision of Purdue University president Mitch Daniels to eliminate the chief diversity officer position and delegate those responsibilities to the provost (Flores, 2015) alongside events like the University of Oklahoma Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter's racist

chant (Svrluga, 2015), does higher education truly have a commitment to equity and diversity? How can those values be fully advanced in today's climate when so many marginalized/minoritized students are questioning whether or not they matter? Should institutions of higher education be spaces where students do not have to question if they matter? What actions will we take to ensure students know they matter?

Finally, this case study illuminates how student activists are calling out the university for its consistent deployment of nonperformative statements to assert its support of equity and diversity. Institutional responses to ActivistU, by directing them to previously articulated nonperformative statements (e.g., the 2007 framework), reinforce the institutional rhetoric of diversity without making actual change; in fact, this prevents the very possibility of change. The responses to ActivistU from PU administrators reflect confidence in their belief that the language of equity and diversity, and their link to "excellence," is producing effects that student activists and leaders do not see, feel, or experience. Administrators likely believe that the statements are performative, but their impact is that language has come to stand in for effects. In asserting that the institution is only concerned with "cosmetic diversity," ActivistU disrupts the institution's invocation of diversity language and therefore its articulated identity. Student activists instituting or insisting upon concrete actions, then, become scapegoats who interrupt the institution's work rather than leaders pushing for changes needed to transform the campus climate. As such, we implore higher education professionals to assess whether the deployment of diversity language operates on their campuses as "non-performatives" and how operationalizing the language of equity and diversity may advance these concepts in ways that are responsive to the needs and concerns of minoritized students at their institutions.

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