Emotional Labor in Shared Equity Leadership Environments:

Creating Emotionally Supportive Spaces

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About the Study

With generous support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC) partnered to conduct a study of shared equity leadership. This effort benefits the higher education sector by filling a critical gap—providing a fuller understanding of what it means when leaders share leadership in service of equity goals. This project consisted of semi-structured interviews with groups of leaders at four institutions representing different institutional types, contexts, and regions, allowing us to learn more about shared equity leadership and the structures that support it.

About the American Council on Education

The American Council on Education (ACE) is a membership organization that mobilizes the higher education community to shape effective public policy and foster innovative, high-quality practice. As the major coordinating body for the nation's colleges and universities, our strength lies in our diverse membership of more than 1,700 colleges and universities, related associations, and other organizations in America and abroad. ACE is the only major higher education association to represent all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions: two-year and four-year, public and private. Our members educate two out of every three students in all accredited, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

About the Pullias Center for Higher Education

One of the world's leading research centers on higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education advances innovative, scalable solutions to improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The mission of the Pullias Center is to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. The Center is currently engaged in research projects to improve access and outcomes for low-income, first-generation students, improve the performance of postsecondary institutions, assess the role of contingent faculty, understand how colleges can undergo reform in order to increase their effectiveness, analyze emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, and assess the educational trajectories of community college students.
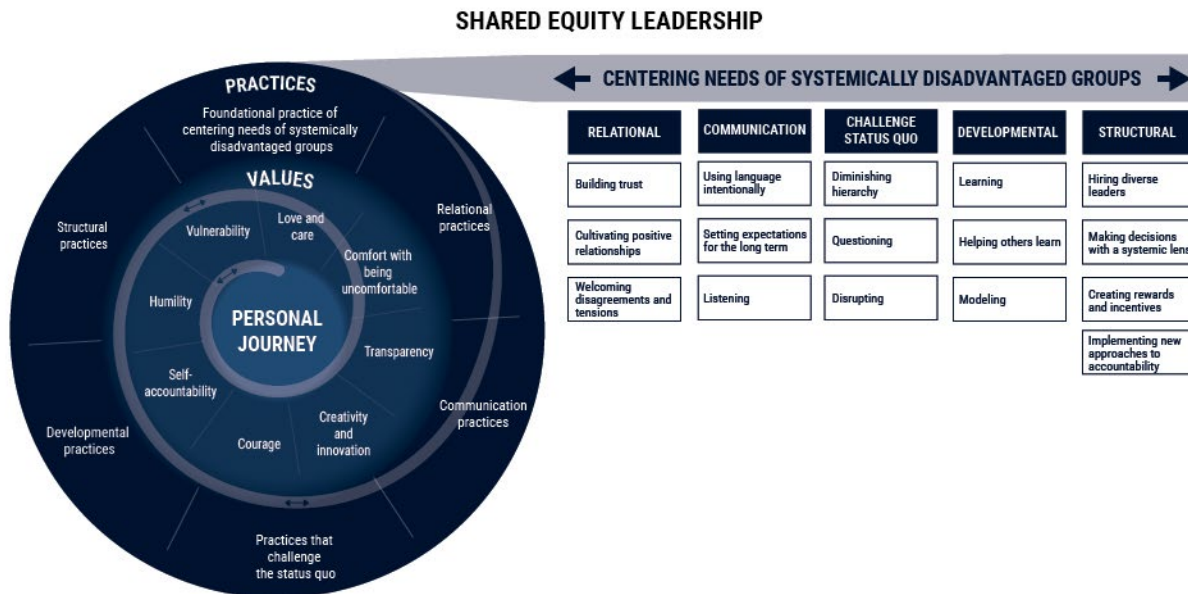
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Introduction

For me, the shared responsibility helps, and again, it's that shared responsibility with opportunities for trust-building and authentic relationship-building. Because if that shared responsibility is going to happen and still be fraught with being overly bureaucratic or being overly politically correct, then it really doesn't help, because the emotional burden is still there. So, if we're going to share, we need to share it all. I mean, to share responsibility is awesome, but I also need to have spaces where I can unpack all the different layers, so that it's understood what I feel like I'm shouldering, so that that too gets shared. It's not just for me to carry those emotional pieces, but that there are other folks who are willing to help carry that however they can from where they are. (Campus leader)

As leaders in higher education increasingly recognize the importance of prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on their campuses, so too does their awareness grow for the inherently emotional nature of DEI work. Indeed, violence and trauma have been major catalysts for action toward more equitable policies and practices on college and university campuses. Events ranging from racist graffiti, speech incidents, and on-campus arrests to the national reverberations of police murders of unarmed members of the Black community carry emotional weight in a way that few other issues in higher education do. However, even the day-to-day work of advocating for racial justice and equity in higher education can carry a significant emotional burden. Higher education scholars have described the ways in which this emotional labor (also known as "cultural taxation") is disproportionately borne by leaders of color—especially women of color—which often leads to feelings of alienation, stress, and burnout (Anderson 2021; Arnold, Osanloo, and Newcomb 2021; Guillaume and Apodaca 2022; Hochschild 1983; Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2020; Miller, Howell, and Struve 2019; Padilla 1994; Porter et al. 2018). These negative impacts affect not only individual leaders' well-being but can also hinder progress on DEI goals across the larger campus community.

The growing emphasis on DEI work among higher education leaders has been accompanied by an understanding that transformational change is necessary to truly dismantle inequitable structures and systems on campus and that such change cannot be achieved by one or a few individuals laboring in isolation. Instead, what is needed is a collective approach to leadership for DEI, where equity truly becomes everyone's work—in other words, shared equity leadership (SEL). SEL is a leadership approach that scales DEI work and creates culture change by connecting individual and organizational transformation. Individuals embrace a personal journey toward critical consciousness to become a different type of leader, and leaders collectively embody new values and enact a set of practices that form new relationships and understandings; ultimately, they are working to dismantle current systems and structures that inhibit equitable outcomes. In our foundational report on this topic (Kezar et al. 2021), we describe the personal, collective, and institutional work necessary to enact this approach to equity leadership. At the heart of SEL is the notion that leaders must first turn inward and do their own personal work in order to then turn outward to transform their institutions—this is what we call the *personal journey toward critical consciousness*. In this process, leaders reflect on their own identities and experiences, as well as the broader structural and systemic nature of inequities and how they fit within those systems and structures. When a campus has a critical mass of leaders who are engaged in this personal journey work, they can then work in concert using a new set of values and practices to meet equity goals and work for culture change. Figure 1 shows the SEL model, including the values and practices that it features.

FIGURE 1. SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP MODEL

SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

PRACTICES
Foundational practice of centering needs of systemically disadvantaged groups

VALUES

Vulnerability | Love and care

Comfort with being uncomfortable

Humility

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Transparency

Self-accountability

Courage | Creativity and innovation

Structural practices

Relational practices

Communication practices

Developmental practices

Practices that challenge the status quo

← CENTERING NEEDS OF SYSTEMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS →

RELATIONAL	COMMUNICATION	CHALLENGE STATUS QUO	DEVELOPMENTAL	STRUCTURAL
Building trust	Using language intentionally	Diminishing hierarchy	Learning	Hiring diverse leaders
Cultivating positive relationships	Setting expectations for the long term	Questioning	Helping others learn	Making decisions with a systemic lens
Welcoming disagreements and tensions	Listening	Disrupting	Modeling	Creating rewards and incentives
				Implementing new approaches to accountability

In this research brief, part of the On Shared Equity Leadership series, we explore what emotional labor looks like in environments where responsibility for DEI leadership is broadly distributed and shared across multiple campus stakeholders, rather than siloed or isolated in a single person or office.[1] While the challenging emotions and emotional labor that accompany DEI work do not disappear in SEL environments, we did find some evidence that the burden is minimized by working in community with other leaders who share the labor. The emotional labor that does still occur is often less burdensome and overwhelming to those involved because of the support they have from colleagues who share both the work and the emotions that come with it. This report first summarizes some of the existing research on emotional labor and DEI work before highlighting the ways in which SEL can alleviate different types of emotional labor. We then go into more detail on how specific values and practices in the SEL model support this distribution of emotional labor, followed by suggestions for how institutions can better acknowledge and support leaders engaged in emotional labor. Our hope is that by recognizing the importance of emotions in this work and welcoming them into professional spaces, institutions can more intentionally address emotional labor in supportive and healing ways and create strategies that assist and reward leaders who carry the weight of these emotions for one another.[2]

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1   The reports in the On Shared Equity Leadership series are based on findings from a three-year multiple-case study of eight higher education institutions across the country. As part of the data collection efforts, our research team collected and reviewed thousands of pages of documents and interviewed over 100 leaders across the eight campuses, including presidents, provosts, and other executive leaders; DEI professionals; student affairs staff; faculty in a variety of disciplines; and staff in facilities, alumni affairs, development, and fundraising.

2   We want to acknowledge the emotional burden equity leaders can encounter, sometimes extending to receiving threats from those opposing DEI efforts (Harris 2023). These occurrences are increasing as the DEI climate grows more hostile, which has involved recent attacks on DEI funding; degrees, certificates, and programming; and hiring practices in higher education by a number of state governors and legislators (Cliburn 2023; Lu 2023). Although data regarding this climate were not captured among study participants (given the timing of data collection), we understand that this is a common lived experience contributing to burnout that we hope to examine in future research.

DEFINITIONS

In this report, when we refer to **equity** we mean the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair. The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. Equity is typically related to remedying conditions for groups that have been historically marginalized based on race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status and other social identities. But we further think about equity from a systemic perspective—systemic equity is a complex combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create, support and sustain social justice. It is a dynamic process that reinforces and replicates equitable ideas, power, resources, strategies, conditions, habits, and outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2021). It suggests that the onus for ameliorating inequities is on the systems (campuses) not on individuals who have experienced harm. Campuses in our study generally adopted a similar conception of equity to the one we adopted as a research team, but they differed in their goals for equity—some focused more narrowly on student success, while others focused on all campus constituents who are attempting to create an environment in which faculty, staff, and administrators feel supported and can also thrive. Thus the institutions we studied had differences in terms of the type of outcomes they targeted (e.g., access, retention, high-impact practices, faculty positions). When we refer to **leadership**, we use a non-positional and non-authority-based definition that is focused on leadership as a collective process aimed at creating change, rather than the actions or traits of a person.

What We Know About Emotional Labor and Why It Matters

The term *emotional labor* was first coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) to address the emotional burden of service work in the helping professions, such as education, social work, and health care. Hochschild (1983) described it as "the affective dimensions of service work where one is tasked with helping others feel emotionally affirmed and supported" (Anderson 2021, 361). A concern that service workers often felt exhausted by work that required a great amount of emotional engagement—which then became their primary reason for leaving the field—brought more attention from social science scholars to the experience of emotional labor (Pines and Aronson 1988).

In higher education literature, a related concept is used to describe the labor that faculty and staff of color are often asked to perform for little or no reward. *Cultural taxation* is defined as "the obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the service was performed" (Padilla 1994, 26). Types of cultural taxation can include discounting or devaluing of research focused on topics such as equity and justice; pressure to educate White colleagues while creatively avoiding race talk in order to make historically dominant groups more comfortable; expectations of service on committees or task forces related to equity issues; lack of appropriate acknowledgment for such service; and judgment or censure for speaking out against racism—yet White faculty or staff who do so are lauded and acknowledged (Arnold, Osanloo, and Newcomb 2021). We leverage sentiments from these closely related concepts, and we use the term "emotional labor" in this brief to describe the ways in which campus leaders navigate the emotionally charged workspace of race, equity, and justice in postsecondary institutions.

Research on the emotional labor that accompanies equity work in higher education reflects and aligns with what we learned from the participants in our study. Leaders who do equity work perform uncompensated emotional labor in a variety of ways (Doan and Kennedy 2022). Equity leaders must navigate daily microaggressions and resistance from individuals who hesitate to have open dialogue, which requires sophisticated facilitation skills, socio-emotional skills, and code-switching skills (Alcalde and Henne-Ochoa 2022). Additionally, leaders of color are often expected to serve as experts on racial issues by virtue of their race alone and to educate privileged groups by using their own deeply personal emotional traumas and experiences. As one leader in our study described:

> My reluctance to be involved with this work . . . has been solely based on the fact that, from the time that I can remember, this work was assumed to be my work. And yet I was the victim of the circumstances that created the need for the work. And I hated that. And I don't use the word hate often, but I hated it. And so, as a result, I resisted anything. And that doesn't mean that I haven't been active in the community. That's a whole other thing. I've been active all my life, but how I engaged, how I was active was shaped very much by the expectation by the majority community, that if it was anything to do with diversity . . . that all heads turned my way. And

that has been a huge burden and a point of anger for me because of the knowledge that I had, that how dare you look at me about this work. This is *your* work. So, I've had to work through all of that to get to where I am today.

Leaders of color experience tokenization—the expectation that they will represent their identity groups as well as the university's commitment to diversity. Even as they take on additional roles and responsibilities, such as taking care of students and communities who share their identities, they are neither adequately compensated nor acknowledged and they sometimes face censure—being alienated by colleagues or subject to punitive action, such as demotion, from their institutions—or dismissal (Bellas 1999; Hanasono et al. 2019; Miller, Howell, and Struve 2019). These experiences of emotional labor can lead to feelings of anger, distrust, frustration, fear, alienation, fatigue, burnout, and depression (Kezar et al. 2018; Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2020; Miller, Howell, and Struve 2019; Porter et al. 2018). Ayala Pines and Elliott Aronson (1988, 19) defined *burnout* as "a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations." Although burnout is experienced equally across sex for those leading for equity, women—particularly women of color—tend to carry greater loads of emotional labor that are inherent in this type of work.

In order to alleviate burnout and the other negative impacts of emotional labor, DEI leaders, especially DEI leaders of color, have developed several coping mechanisms. Two main strategies have emerged from the broader body of scholarship: disengaging and seeking validation and support (Evans and Moore 2015; Guillaume and Apodaca 2022; Miller, Howell, and Struve 2019). Disengaging is a conscious decision to remove oneself from not only advocacy on racial issues but also from dismissive, unsupportive spaces. It also involves learning how to say no when asked to take on additional responsibilities. Seeking support and validation involves leaders working collaboratively with other team members to articulate and affirm feelings and experiences in order to obtain a sense of healing and belonging (Rendon 1994; Strayhorn 2018).

While individual equity leaders have developed these coping mechanisms of disengagement and seeking validation for their own benefit, some scholars have suggested that institutions should bear responsibility for mitigating the emotional burden that accompanies equity work. In particular, R. Kirk Anderson (2021, 10) proposed a notion of "burning through," referred to as reorientation of "burnout as an institutional problem rather than an individual one." In order for institutions to take responsibility for the burnout that accompanies emotional labor, leaders should scrutinize the structures, policies, practices, and cultures that might impose an emotional burden on equity workers, which could mean improving staffing and compensation for equity work; delegating responsibilities equitably; taking a more collaborative, proactive approach; and offering resources to cultivate resilience in the face of trauma (Anderson 2021). Institutions should also develop validating and supportive structures for leaders doing this work so that they are not left to seek out these necessary supports on their own. In our shared equity leadership (SEL) work, we also advocate for an institutional approach within which campuses should proactively create structures that mitigate the emotional burden and reward leaders involved in emotional labor.

It is well documented in the literature that people of color shoulder the weight of both emotional labor and DEI work significantly more than their White counterparts; however, what has yet to be explored is how distributed leadership approaches, such as SEL, may impact emotional labor. We aim to bridge that gap in this brief. As Anderson's (2021) notion of "burning through" suggests, we focus on institutional responsibility and what institutions can do to minimize the negative impacts of emotional labor while employing the SEL model, rather than on the strategies that individual leaders may use.

We also want to note that there are a variety of (often conflicting) ways to conceptualize and describe emotions. The Western, White traditions that undergird American higher education often portray emotions as separate and distinct from the intellectual work of the academy instead of as a core part that is fundamental to the work. Such notions have led emotional labor to be dismissed as work that is unimportant or not real (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, and Krone 2018). We reject the perspective that emotions can be separated from mind and body and that they are unimportant in academia. Further, we want to emphasize that we do not only view emotions as purely a psychological phenomenon but also as being social and cultural constructs (Ahmed 2014). Additionally, those with more power are able to express emotions in different ways than those who are more marginalized, and emotions are interpreted differently by those with different identities and experiences, which gives political weight to emotions. For example, emotions such as anger or sadness that may be seen as negative by those with privilege may actually serve an important purpose when they are felt or experienced around issues of oppression and inequity. One could argue that we *should* feel angry when confronted with injustice, and we *should* feel sad when students or colleagues share painful stories of racist experiences., we want to emphasize that we are not advocating for the suppression or dismissal of emotions when we describe the ways that SEL can minimize the negative impacts of emotional labor. Rather, our research suggests that we need to consciously make space for emotions and recognize them as an integral part of equity work and of the human experience. This recognition can help minimize the isolation experienced by those leaders of color—particularly women—who most often bear the burden of emotional labor in equity work.

Now we turn to lessons from our research on how SEL can support emotional labor.
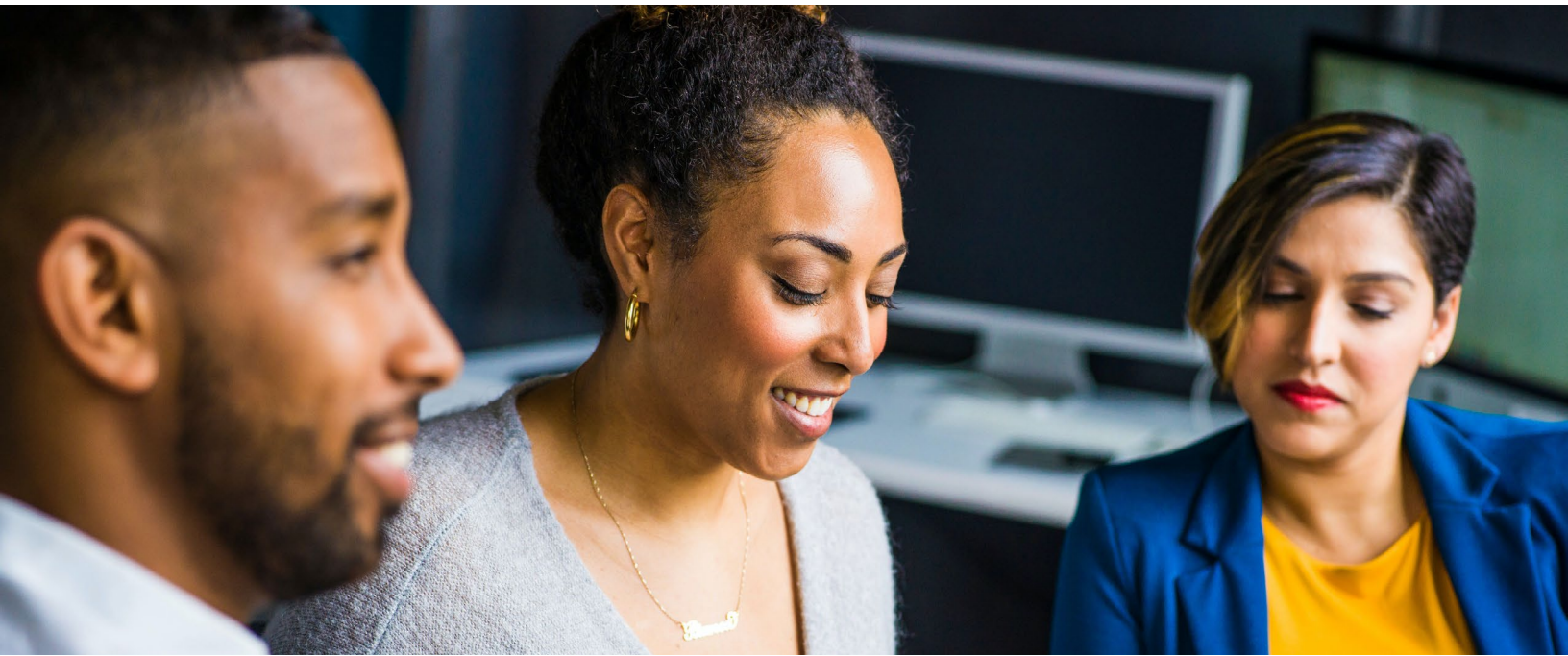
SEL's Impact on Emotional Labor

While shared equity leadership (SEL) does not completely remove or eliminate emotional labor, we did find that leaders on campuses enacting SEL experienced some relief or a layer of protection against the negative impacts of emotional labor. Leaders in our study described several different types of emotional labor and different ways that SEL helped support them in that labor.

First, leaders described the labor of convincing or proving to others the importance and value of equity and working tirelessly to build a case that a critical problem of inequity exists and one worth investing resources to create real change. On campuses using the SEL model (see figure 1), this type of emotional labor was considerably minimized. While the leaders in our study described how they expended a large amount of energy performing this type of emotional labor in prior roles on other campuses, they noted that they no longer had to spend time and energy convincing people that equity matters when everyone on their campus was working together to take responsibility for DEI. Having a critical mass of leaders who not only bought into but also shared in the leadership of the work helped more equitably distribute this type of emotional labor.

The second type of emotional labor described by the leaders in our study involved managing the difficult emotions (such as frustration, isolation, anger, or sadness) that often accompany equity work. Though SEL did not eliminate this type of emotional labor, it did mitigate it somewhat by creating environments where leaders felt comfortable sharing their emotions with one another and received the validation and support they needed to keep these emotions from leading to burnout or disengagement.

Third, some leaders described the labor of educating and managing the emotions of colleagues who are just getting started in equity work (typically White colleagues). Again, this labor is not necessarily eliminated in SEL environments. But the critical mass of leaders who are deeply invested in growing on their personal journey toward critical consciousness means that this type of labor is more broadly distributed and not disproportionately borne by just a few leaders, most typically people and women of color. In this section, we describe three types of emotional labor in more detail and provide examples of how SEL minimized the burdens commonly associated with them.

No Longer Making the Case: SEL Alleviates the Emotional Labor of Proving That Equity Work Matters

One significant type of emotional labor that is often performed in the context of equity work involves convincing others at the institution that there is a problem—whether it's lack of diversity, inequitable outcomes for different groups, or environments or climates that are not inclusive of those from minoritized backgrounds. Equity leaders at many institutions spend a lot of time and effort trying to make the case to colleagues and other leaders that there is a problem in the first place and that the institution should take action to change it. Even when institutional colleagues understand there is a problem, DEI leaders face an uphill battle and expend additional labor trying to convince those colleagues why they should care to change it, why it matters, and how it impacts the larger campus community. They are often met with minimization, denial, resistance, or even gaslighting when they try to point out inequities or propose solutions, which leads to anger, frustration, and exhaustion (Davis and Ernst, 2020).

On campuses that are using an SEL model, leaders felt that this type of emotional labor was largely unnecessary. Because there was a critical mass of people collectively engaging in the work, individual leaders—who were often leaders of color or women of color—noted that they no longer felt the burden was solely on them to make the case for equity. Instead, there was a shared understanding within the campus community that equity is a priority, as this leader, a woman of color, described:

> We are in this together, all of the team. And so having been a part of these conversations at other institutions, the emotional work. . . . I knew that there was a limit to what I would get done. I knew that I only had certain allies. I knew that there would be a limit to the understanding of the issues. I knew that other things would take precedence. . . . And so the frustration probably would be higher because I'd be like, gosh, pick your points. Decide what you're going to charge in on about today and how you are going to get that done and who's going to—what are the meetings you're going to have before the meeting to make sure that when you get in the meeting you get what you need, and all those things. Whereas here, I don't really have to do that work in that way. And the frustration that I have if we're not getting someplace is a frustration that is shared by many people. And is not usually internally focused. We're not usually saying, oh gosh, the cabinet didn't understand it or the president didn't understand it. I trust that my colleagues get it and that we are all working towards the same thing. . . . So I don't feel alone.

Having a critical mass of individuals engaging in leading equity-related efforts helped lift some of this burden from those who have historically felt frustrated in pushing equity work forward by themselves. SEL helped alleviate feelings of isolation in the work, as well as other negative emotions, because leaders trusted that their colleagues and superiors understood the importance of equity and felt emotions were shared among the collective. Leaders were ultimately able to avoid internalizing the otherwise challenging emotions that have traditionally led to burnout.

SEL Creates Supportive Environments to Process Difficult Emotions That Are Part of DEI Work

The second type of emotional labor described by leaders in our study involves managing the difficult emotions that accompany equity work in general. Because equity work involves issues of systemic oppression based on identity—race, gender, sexuality, and more—it is deeply personal and can provoke intense emotions. When leading equity work, leaders must confront the challenges and traumas that are created by the structures and cultures of campus and society and experienced by those with marginalized identities (or themselves). These confrontations often result in feelings of anger, sadness, fear, betrayal, or fatigue. When such emotions are held in and left to fester and grow, it can have immobilizing effects on equity leaders, causing them to feel stuck and leading them to disengage and withdraw from the work altogether. While these emotions are not eliminated on campuses that use an SEL model, we did find that SEL mitigates the impact of these emotions by creating environments where leaders felt their experiences were welcomed, understood, and shared among the collective. In these spaces, leaders received the validation and support they needed to honor and process their emotions and not suffer negative consequences. One leader shared thoughts on how processing and working through emotions together was critical to moving beyond existing emotional barriers:

> And in that open, transparent process where people know that they're not being judged and we're genuinely trying to find solutions to issues I think that's where there's a lot of sharing and it does involve more intense emotions where . . . I think it provides an outlet for us to actually work through things so that then we can kind of get to the core. Okay, this is how we feel, but what's causing this feeling and what specific steps can we take toward that? Otherwise, that emotional barrier kind of just stays there and it's hard to get past that so it's like when you're angry and it's hard to get to the issue because you're just angry and you don't want to hear what the other person has to say and so I think that [leadership group where emotions are welcomed and processed] is helpful.

This example underscores the importance of recognizing, honoring, and processing emotions before moving on with business as usual. Ignoring the emotions in the room and jumping straight to the next agenda item or to problem-solving could be counterproductive and might magnify emotional barriers, which can lead to reinforced feelings of anger, minimization, and isolation. Sharing a space with trusted colleagues to process emotions helped to create a sense of solidarity around the work—that everyone is in it together and likely experiencing similar emotions. In addition to sharing and validating one another's emotions and experiences, leaders in our study described how they intentionally and proactively worked to support each other's emotional labor. Whether by volunteering to take on pieces of a colleague's equity work when they felt

overwhelmed or just being mindful of the emotional toll the work can take, leaders described how the shared responsibility inherent in the SEL model provides room for emotions to also be shared:

> It's been really, really helpful to have a team for whom that kind of emotional labor is more distributed, where we do have very upfront conversations about needing to support each other . . . sort of identifying it and acknowledging it and then actively taking things on to help relieve someone else's burden.

Paying attention to emotional labor, creating space for colleagues to be open about their emotions, and intentionally stepping in to help relieve one another's burdens before they become overwhelming helped distribute emotional labor more broadly and lighten its toll on leaders who practiced SEL.

Managing Others' Emotions

Managing and tending to the emotions of others while masking or suppressing one's own is another way of conceptualizing emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). In terms of equity work, research indicates that leaders of color often spend significant time educating White leaders on issues of race and racism as well as dealing with the emotions of their White colleagues as they are confronted with their own privileges and complicity in structural or systemic racism (DiAngelo 2011; Liebow and Glazer 2023). Holding space for emotions provoked by White fragility while also masking or downplaying their own feelings of frustration, disbelief, or anger requires a significant amount of emotional labor on the part of leaders of color and can lead to negative emotional and physical consequences (Evans and Moore 2015; Quaye et al. 2020). Further, leaders of color are often expected to do this work without any remuneration or credit (Domingo et al. 2022).

Our data suggest that having leaders collectively engaged in equity work could mitigate the impact of this type of emotional labor. Because leaders in the SEL model are expected to be actively engaged on a personal journey toward critical consciousness, White leaders are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and growth rather than relying on the (unpaid) labor of their colleagues of color. Further, the critical mass of leaders doing this work means that leaders share collective responsibility for educating and holding each other accountable rather than a single leader or a couple leaders of color being forced to manage the emotional responses of White leaders who may be early in their journeys. Additionally, White allies who are further along on their journeys can take on the work to support their fellow White colleagues.

SEL Values and Practices Support Emotional Labor

The previous sections describe the ways that shared equity leadership (SEL) can help alleviate the burden of three different types of emotional labor. In this section, we delve into more detail about specific aspects of the SEL model that help support emotional labor as leaders work collectively to promote equity on their campuses. As we mentioned in the beginning of this report, SEL involves leaders collectively enacting a set of values and practices while they also individually work to grow on their personal journey toward critical consciousness (see figure 1). *Values* are the beliefs and ideals that matter to individuals or groups, while *practices* are ongoing, regular activities that leaders perform both individually and collectively in order to accomplish their equity goals. While all of the identified SEL values and practices are important to this work, we observed a few that seem especially meaningful in supporting emotional labor.

These included the practices of *building trust and cultivating positive relationships* and the values of *comfort with being uncomfortable, vulnerability*, and *love and care*. These practices and values worked to validate both the experiences and emotions of equity leaders by making them feel heard, seen, and understood.

Practices

Building trust and *cultivating positive relationships* were key practices for supporting emotional labor. Without strong relationships and a foundation of trust, leaders of color may not feel safe or comfortable sharing their emotions. They may not be able to create the sorts of validating spaces and experiences that make the emotional labor of equity leadership manageable instead of overwhelming. One leader described the foundational importance of trust and relationships:

> We've learned in the process . . . [that] this type of relational work often times remains invisible and it's not seen as action-oriented. And we try to flip the script and say that is the action. Creating the relationship and the foundation of trust is the first step towards making that the institutional change that we want. Because part of social change is how we work collectively. And if we can't trust each other or have a relationship, there's no way that this collective can work towards something.

Relatedly, it is critical for leaders to do more than just talk about building trust and strengthening relationships; they must actually take actions that build trust—such as transforming decision-making processes to be more transparent and inclusive. If institutional leaders do not take concrete actions, talk about trust means little.

Values

Several SEL values helped leaders to build trust and develop positive relationships, which further supports emotional labor as a collective endeavor rather than one that is disproportionately concentrated among one or a few leaders from minoritized backgrounds.

First, leaders described how gaining *comfort with being uncomfortable* was important for supporting emotional labor by building trust and relationships. Discussing topics related to equity work, such as identity or race and racism, can evoke visceral emotions among individuals who may share difficult experiences of trauma and discrimination. Hearing heavy emotions of anger, disappointment, and sadness from colleagues can be a challenge for many to listen to without becoming uncomfortable; however, leaders noted how profound it was for them when they or their colleagues leaned into this discomfort, listened, and further probed. As one male leader of color recounted:

> The comfort with being uncomfortable—that's something that I think is a learned skill, a learned attribute. Often times we're looking for a conversation to lead to a solution, and sometimes it just leads to more illumination or more problems, and in some instances that's okay. . . . Being comfortable with strong emotions—anger, and disappointment, and sadness—being comfortable in that space, and recognizing that people have the right to have that experience. Giving them space to have that experience, without always trying to solve the problem before really processing the emotions, [is important].

Space is made for *vulnerability* when leaders take an active role in not only allowing people to openly share the emotions they are experiencing but also to internally acknowledge their own uncomfortable emotions.

Displaying vulnerability allowed leaders to have honest conversations about all the emotions present in the room (including discomfort), validated and affirmed those experiencing the emotions, and created an opportunity for the group to collectively work through heavy emotions. For example, one leader described how their campus's president opened up about her own experiences with discrimination and prejudice after she participated in a racial justice training with faculty and staff. Making herself vulnerable in this way helped to normalize sharing emotionally difficult experiences for other campus leaders.

Love and care emerged as another important value that helped leaders build strong relationships and support the emotional labor involved with SEL. Leaders described how they felt validated, seen, and heard by colleagues who checked in on how they were feeling, particularly after an emotionally taxing meeting or encounter. Leaders also explained feeling cared for when their colleagues halted meetings to check in on and process elevated emotions in the room. Recognizing the need to prioritize an individual's well-being over the desire to maintain business as usual really set a precedent of honoring equity leaders' humanity over the work to be accomplished. Checking in both one on one and within group settings showed leaders that their colleagues sincerely cared for them and helped minimize lingering heavy emotions or burdens.

Showing care for one another by checking in after difficult moments, embodying vulnerability in sharing emotions and challenging experiences, and learning how to lean into discomfort helped equity leaders build trust and strong relationships. These relationships provided a strong foundation for leaders to support and validate each other's emotional experiences, ultimately helping to share or lighten the emotional labor of DEI leadership.

Recommendations: Institutional Strategies for Supporting Emotional Labor

There are several steps institutions can take to support leaders' emotions and ensure that emotional labor does not become overly burdensome.[3] While many of these institutional strategies can be initiated by grassroots or mid-level leaders, they require support from senior leaders, such as presidents, cabinet members, and trustees, in order to be adequately resourced and institutionalized. This section highlights the main strategies that emerged from our research.

Center People of Color in Decision-Making Around Emotional Labor Support Strategies

A key strategy for institutions that are working to better support emotional labor is to center people of color in decision-making around support strategies. While it is important for White leaders to step up and participate, they should not be making decisions about the best ways to support this work without contributions and leadership from colleagues of color. Otherwise, there is a risk that White leaders' discomfort could end up shutting down emotions rather than opening up space for them—especially emotions that might be considered challenging or negative, such as anger, fear, and sadness. It is a tricky balancing act to center leaders of color without placing an additional burden on their time and energy, but it is crucial for institutions to get this right.

Create Intentional Spaces for Honoring and Processing Emotions

Additionally, institutions should create intentional spaces within existing meetings to honor and process emotions. During regular meetings, while business remained a priority, so did providing the time, space and emotional support to process emotions. For example, one campus had a council that oversaw equity work; in addition to planning and strategizing around equity issues, this council took time at the beginning of each meeting to check in and talk about how they were feeling, as this leader described:

> We've developed the ritual of checking in and closing, and that has been kind of a
> [council] signature, I would say, to the point now that this year each council mem-

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3   Our research also uncovered several strategies that individual leaders can use to help manage the burdens associated with emotional labor, including the importance of self-care strategies such as taking vacation; holding boundaries like not checking emails after a certain time, when possible; and seeking community both inside and outside the institution. These individual strategies are also well-documented in the literature (for example, Chance 2022; Kelly et al. 2021). However, as we noted earlier in this report, we believe that institutions—not individuals—should bear the brunt of responsibility for supporting emotional labor. As a result, we do not focus on individual support strategies in this report, but readers can take a look at the sources listed in this footnote for more information on these strategies.

ber has an assigned date where they're checking in [on] the entire council. So we used to bring in different check-ins that are—sometimes they're related to the work, and sometimes they're not. They're about you [personally]. . . . And so the check-in really helps with grounding us, and also offers some empathy in the work as we move forward. . . . [For example,] after [some difficult campus] incidents we had a scheduled meeting. And someone had decided to check in with—he brought in a set of Post-its and gave it out to everybody and said, "Can you draw how you're feeling today?" And of course, no one's an artist in there, and they're doing their drawings, but then we got a moment to share where we're at, right? And for the most part because of what the campus had been going through, we were in that space of trying to make sense of how to move forward, or how to heal from the various violences. . . . And so, it took us outside of our head to draw versus having to write or speak, and then allowed us to reflect for a moment. It gave us a space to be present with our feelings, be creative. And yet we were still connecting with the harsh issues that our campus was going through. So, again, I think if you're not in the work, these types of activities are dismissed in some ways. But they really serve to uplift the morale of the people who are working hard in the trenches.

These check-ins became an established norm within the council. They slowly radiated outward and became institutionalized as council members brought the practice with them into other spaces on campus.

Establish Healing Circles

Institutions can also support emotional labor by creating healing circles. Campuses in our study offered healing circles regularly throughout the academic year and opened them to the entire campus community, allowing students, staff, faculty, and administrators to come together and process deeply felt emotions and traumas. On some campuses, healing circles were set up with a structured format to allow attendees to have equal time to speak and actively listen to one another's experiences and emotions; other campuses had less formally structured healing circles that simply created space for people to share and be in community with one another. The primary purpose of the healing circles was to welcome in every emotion and experience to help provide healing from systemic traumas such as sexism or racism. The realization that students, staff, and faculty were having and sharing similar emotions in these healing circles was particularly profound. One important caveat is that institutions must be intentional about how these healing circles are structured and facilitated so that they do not function as trauma bonding or venting sessions instead of spaces for healing. Careful and experienced facilitation and regular or repeated sessions can help mitigate these risks.[4]

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4   For more content on healing circles, please read *Capacity Building for Shared Equity Leadership: Approaches and Considerations for the Work,* part of the On Shared Equity Leadership series.

Leverage SEL Values and Practices to Build Emotionally Supportive Spaces

SEL values and practices can be leveraged to build the emotionally supportive spaces described above (both within existing meetings and within stand-alone healing circles). Building trust, normalizing vulnerability and comfort with being uncomfortable, and operating with love and care are all useful for this process. Additionally, other values and practices we did not describe in this research brief—such as welcoming disagreements and tensions, modeling, and listening—can help institutions as they create emotionally supportive spaces (Kezar et al. 2021).

Formalize and Reward Coaching and Mentoring Programs

Institutions can also formalize and reward *one-on-one coaching or mentoring programs* that leaders often already do informally with little to no recognition or reward. Mentoring and coaching are practices that can also include both holding space for and processing the emotions that arise when colleagues engage in equity leadership work. For example, one leader in our study reflected on a time when she talked to a colleague who had been struggling with processing an emotionally charged conversation she had with graduate students. The leader, recounting the conversation, shared that her colleague said, "I just couldn't get the stories out of my head. I just ached. It was so hard for me to process." Seeing her colleague struggle, this leader responded to her colleague and "asked . . . 'how did that make you feel?' And then she actually processed it right there with me, which is totally fine because I was totally open to do that with her. That was not a planned processing moment for her, and the truth is that this person needed it." This leader was able to coach her colleague through her emotional response to the traumatic experiences her students had shared with her, which allowed the colleague to acknowledge and process the feelings but not get stuck in them. These informal one-on-one processing experiences can also be formalized by institutions into coaching or mentoring experiences, with more experienced DEI leaders paired up with more junior leaders to share and work through challenging emotional experiences together. Mentors or coaches should be rewarded for their work, whether through credit in performance reviews or through additional compensation, such as stipends or merit increases. Appropriate compensation and reward for this work can help encourage those who are otherwise not engaged to take responsibility for not only educating themselves but also for claiming a stake in the work. These actions thereby help to break the cycle of burdening those at the margins to do all of the educating, which far too often leads to burnout.

Acknowledge and Reward Emotional Labor More Broadly

Relatedly, institutions can alleviate the negative impacts of emotional labor by more appropriately *acknowledging and rewarding the emotional labor* shouldered by equity leaders. The all-too-common undervaluing of

DEI-related work can amplify the emotional toll on equity leaders. Ensuring that equity work in general is acknowledged and rewarded can begin to help ameliorate the negative emotional toll that the work can have. When leaders are not expected to do this work for free, some of the frustration and anger that can accompany the work may lift. Further research into rewarding and compensating equity work should also consider the ways in which emotional labor can be accounted for and compensated accordingly—whether that is the labor of convincing others that equity even matters, the labor of educating others or managing others' emotions, or the labor of navigating intense and traumatic subjects and situations.

Name Historical and Ongoing Traumas

Senior leaders, including presidents, cabinet members, and trustees, should take concerted steps to learn about the history of their institutions and communities and be able to *name historical and ongoing traumas*. Many study participants described very visceral emotions they have carried for years while engaging equity work within racist and oppressive institutions, which many times are housed on lands that have historically been loci for violence, genocide, and racism. Institutions publicly named historical and ongoing traumas by hosting annual events that commemorate the lives and cultures of those who were enslaved, murdered, and buried on institutional grounds. Institutions also hosted regular cultural events throughout the academic year to honor those who formerly occupied the land and whose lives were senselessly taken. When presenting or speaking in an open forum or public conference, presidents, faculty, and graduate students often acknowledged their institution's role in these historic, violent events by naming and honoring the victims in a public statement. Uncovering and confronting these dark truths and explicitly naming the institution's role in them were pivotal in helping the campus community begin healing. Leaders described the ways that this acknowledgment helped them move past deeply held anger and even despair and to feel more connected to their campus and community.

Repair Broken Relationships and Rebuild Trust

Similarly, institutions should work to *repair broken relationships and rebuild trust* with leaders of color and other stakeholders who have engaged in equity work for years. This strategy in particular requires initiation and support from senior leaders so that it is modeled for others across campus. Many participants in our study described the importance of this step in moving forward. As a result of years of broken promises, lack of action, and little real change in terms of equity work, leaders of color were distrustful of the institution and of disproportionately White, cisgender, and male senior leadership. In addition to acknowledging trauma and its impact on individuals, institutions and senior leaders must acknowledge its impact on relationships and understand that trust must be actively and intentionally rebuilt. One leader described how she worked with a group of fellow equity leaders to rebuild trust and relationships. In order to get to a place of action, she spent the first three months of their meetings focusing on relationship- and team-building, which created spaces for leaders to be open about their frustrations and experiences with tokenization or having felt used by senior leaders. Institutions must recognize the importance of this rebuilding process and plan for it in thoughtful and intentional ways.

Conclusion

As leaders do the hard work of dismantling inequitable systems and rethinking ingrained oppressive policies and practices, the important role emotions play in doing this work is becoming increasingly apparent. The emotional labor involved with equity work has for too long gone unrecognized, unacknowledged, and unrewarded. Emotional labor is disproportionately foisted upon leaders of color and, in particular, women of color; this can lead to many negative psychological and physical consequences, such as burnout. Existing research offers several potential coping strategies for managing emotional labor—most notably, either disengaging or opting out of emotional labor, or seeking validating spaces and relationships when doing the work. However, these strategies focus on what individual leaders can do to support their own emotional labor (or that of their colleagues), rather than what the institution and its leadership should do to support emotional labor. We strongly advocate for an institutionally focused approach in which institutions bear responsibility for acknowledging, supporting, and rewarding the emotional labor that is inherent in equity work.

Our research on shared equity leadership (SEL) shows that environments in which equity leadership is shared or distributed more broadly throughout the institution can help alleviate some of the negative impacts of emotional labor. Having a critical mass of leaders who are engaged on a personal journey toward critical consciousness and committed to equity work, as well as to the institutional structures that support both DEI work and shared leadership, means that leaders do not have to expend as much time or energy trying to advocate for equity work. This critical mass can thus alleviate a key source of emotional labor for equity workers. While SEL does not and cannot eliminate the challenging emotions that DEI leaders experience, it can create supportive, validating spaces for leaders to honor and process their emotions, rather than leaving individuals to create their own spaces while seeking support. The SEL values and practices we discuss in this report can be leveraged to build these supportive spaces.

We conclude with an exhortation to leaders not to ignore, downplay, or fear the emotionality of equity work. Leaders who do not give emotions their proper due diligence risk losing the trust of their colleagues and threaten the progress of their equity agendas. While welcoming emotions into the workplace is countercultural in many ways—both in academia and in White western culture at large—we suggest that intentionally creating space to bring emotions into the work can inspire creativity to find new and innovative solutions to equity challenges.

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