

On Shared Equity Leadership Series

# Leading for Equity from Where You Are:

How Leaders in Different Roles

Engage in Shared Equity Leadership



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# **Leading for Equity from Where You Are: How Leaders in Different Roles Engage in Shared Equity Leadership**

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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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# Executive Summary

In this report, the fourth in the On Shared Equity Leadership series, we describe the ways that leaders in different campus roles contribute to shared equity leadership (SEL) efforts. SEL is a leadership approach that scales diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work and creates culture change by connecting individual and organizational transformation. Individuals embrace a personal journey toward critical consciousness to become equity-oriented leaders. Collectively, leaders embody a set of values and enact a set of practices that form new relationships and understandings, ultimately working to dismantle current systems and structures that inhibit equitable outcomes. This report examines roles from both a functional perspective (e.g., faculty, student affairs, and DEI-specific roles) and from a positional view (e.g., senior-level, mid-level, and ground-level leaders), and it highlights the ways in which different values and practices are especially important for leaders in particular roles. Key takeaways include:

- Faculty and staff will have unique perspectives and experiences from their various roles that they can bring to bear in SEL environments. Their roles position them distinctly to enact different values and practices as they engage in equity leadership. For instance, faculty members are particularly well suited to enacting practices such as *learning* and *helping others* learn due to their work as experts and educators.
- Leaders can also engage in SEL in ways that vary by their role function—the specific type of work done in particular roles such as student affairs work, faculty work, or DEI-specific work, among others. The nature of these different role functions may position leaders to more effectively enact particular values and practices. For example, a leader in a student-facing role is well positioned to enact the practice of *understanding and centering students' needs* due to the student-centered nature of their work.
- Leaders' positions in the organizational hierarchy also shape the way they engage in SEL. Senior-level leaders, for example, have the power and authority to enact **structural practices** such as *creating rewards and incentives*, whereas ground-level leaders are well positioned to use **relational practices** such as *cultivating positive relationships* and *building trust* to develop coalitions and advocate for change. Mid-level leaders work up, down, and across the organization, and they may lean on different values and practices depending on the situation and the audience.
- Leaders' functional area and position in the organizational hierarchy can both shape the values and practices they enact. For example, a senior-level student affairs leader could glean helpful lessons from both the Student-Facing Roles and the Senior-Level Roles sections of this report.
- In addition to the values and practices that are important for all senior-level leaders, presidents are uniquely positioned to leverage **communication practices** to drive equity work in SEL environments.

Reflection questions throughout the report and discussion prompts at the end provide a framework for leaders to consider how their roles might best position them to contribute to SEL.

## Background

*People come to me with ideas [for how to do DEI better in other roles like HR]. . . . And . . . that's great. But what do you want to do in **your** role, around **your** job description and **your** team's work? What is the big idea in **your** space? That's what I'm interested in. Not what you think other people can do. So it's always like, "They can do this, and I am free from any responsibility." But DEI is the core of every single job—every single job. It's a way of being and walking through this world. And so we need to get people to focus in on what they have choices around, what they have control over, and the changes they can make from a more equitable space. And that will help distribute the sense of responsibility.*

As colleges and universities work to broaden responsibility for equity work and embed equity leadership across campus, individuals are reinventing their roles and rethinking what equity leadership means within their purview or locus of control. How can staff members in facilities or fundraising, for example, think about the ways that their work can support their campus's collective equity work? How, exactly, does DEI work intersect with the many varied functional areas across our increasingly complex campuses? In our study of [shared equity leadership](#) (SEL), we have spoken with hundreds of leaders in various campus roles and learned many lessons about how leaders can think about their own unique role within the collective SEL experience.<sup>1</sup>

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. Collectively, leaders embody new values and enact a set of practices that form new relationships and understandings, ultimately working to dismantle current systems and structures that inhibit equitable outcomes. In our foundational report on this topic, we describe the personal, collective, and institutional work necessary to enact this approach to equity leadership (Kezar et al. 2021).

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. While every leader may not be at the same point in their personal journey, it is crucial for a campus to have a critical mass of individuals engaged in this personal journey work. When a critical mass is achieved on a campus, leaders can work in concert using a new set of values and practices to meet equity goals and work for culture change.

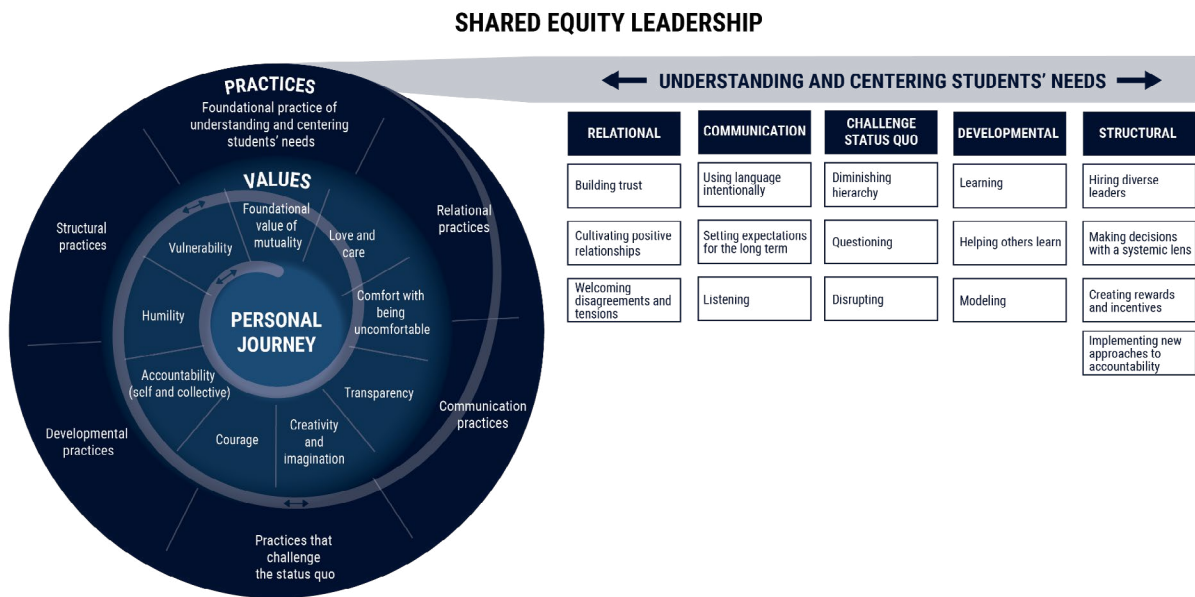
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<sup>1</sup> The reports in the On Shared Equity Leadership series are based on findings from a three-year multiple-case study of eight higher education institutions across the country. As part of the data collection efforts, our research team collected 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.

Figure 1 shows the SEL process and all the values and practices that it features.<sup>2</sup> The SEL values are *mutuality, love and care, comfort with being uncomfortable, transparency, creativity and imagination, courage, accountability (self and mutual), humility, and vulnerability*. The SEL practices are grouped into five categories of related practices, undergirded by the foundational practice of *understanding and centering students' needs*. The practices are:

- **Relational practices**—*building trust, cultivating positive relationships, welcoming disagreements and tensions*
- **Communication practices**—*using language intentionally, setting expectations for the long term, listening*
- **Practices that challenge the status quo**—*diminishing hierarchy, questioning, disrupting*
- **Developmental practices**—*learning, helping others learn, modeling*
- **Structural practices**—*hiring diverse leaders; making decisions with a systemic lens; creating rewards and incentives; implementing new approaches to accountability*

FIGURE 1. SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP



2 Throughout this report, when we refer to a category of practices, we will highlight it in bold (e.g., **structural practices**) and when we refer to a specific value or practice, we will italicize it (e.g., *hiring diverse leaders*).



## DEFINITIONS

In this report, we refer to **equity** as 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 concept 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 at the level of outcomes (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, rather than the actions or traits of a person.

For this report, we investigated how leaders might enact parts of the SEL model differently depending on their roles. Regardless of leaders' roles, the core tenets of SEL applied. Leaders engaging in this work must be on a personal journey toward critical consciousness, and they embody and enact a set of values and practices collectively in the course of doing this work. However, we did find some differences in how leaders enacted parts of the SEL model (specifically values and practices) depending on their roles.

Originally, we framed our study as being about “equity-minded leadership teams,” thinking that we would be studying team leadership; given this framing, we also planned to investigate team roles as described by Bensimon and Neumann (1993), in addition to formal roles or functional areas. Instead, we found a much broader and more distributed approach to equity leadership on the campuses in our study, hence the reframing as “shared” equity leadership (Pearce and Conger 2003; Holcombe et al. 2021). The concept of team roles became less compelling as well, since most campuses had a widespread and diffuse group of leaders rather than a tightly defined team.

Instead, we examined organizational roles more broadly. Organizational roles “operate on an individual level and are reinforced by ways in which individuals interact with and respond to others within the institution” (Amey and Eddy 2018, 209). There are a variety of ways to conceptualize or categorize organizational roles (Bess and Dee 2008; Biddle 1979, 1986; Hindin 2007). For this report, we conceptualized organizational roles in two ways. First, we examined role function, or the specific type of work done in particular roles, such as student affairs work, faculty work, or DEI-specific work, among others. The different foci, priorities, and goals of leaders in different functional roles suggest that they might take slightly distinct approaches to SEL.<sup>3</sup>

3 This report focuses on how leaders in different roles can enact SEL, but we want to recognize the many existing contributions to DEI work from faculty and staff across the country, such as Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Centers; inclusive teaching initiatives; National Science Foundation and Howard Hughes Medical Institute work to diversify science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and more. SEL can (and should) build upon such existing efforts and leverage the work of longtime DEI leaders while connecting and coordinating with others across campus to amplify and grow the work so that equity becomes everyone's responsibility—not just the work of a few.

Second, we examined roles in terms of their position in the organizational hierarchy—senior, mid-level, and ground-level leaders (Bess and Dee 2008). As the broader literature on shared leadership suggests, there are some practices that leaders in positions of authority in particular must attend to in order to effectively promote SEL environments (Kezar 2014; Holcombe et al. 2021). There are also practices best enacted by those in the middle of the organization or those on the ground (Amey and Eddy 2018; Kezar 2014; Kezar and Lester 2011). In each section, we include reflection questions for leaders in these roles, as well as questions for others about how best to leverage leaders in these roles to contribute to SEL.

We do want to emphasize that while there is value in thinking about how leaders in different roles may be positioned to participate in SEL in different ways, roles are not deterministic. Our data suggest that leaders in certain roles are well suited to enacting particular values and practices, but leaders can also lean into any of the values and practices based on their individual strengths, skills, and experiences. Further, we recognize that leaders' social identities and experiences may enhance or constrain the ways they are able to display certain values and practices (Bess and Dee 2008; Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin 2006). For example, women and people of color may be judged or even penalized for displaying vulnerability in a professional setting, while White men may be admired or lauded for it. Or leaders of color may be expected to challenge the status quo and point out inequities in ways that White leaders are not. It is critical for leaders of all backgrounds to think about and reflect on how their identities shape the ways they are able to operate as leaders—because they do. For some leaders, their identities and experiences may be inextricably intertwined with the ways they think about their leadership role, while others (especially those from non-minoritized backgrounds) may not consider their identity much when thinking about how they operate as leaders. It is crucial for leaders engaged in SEL to recognize and navigate these dynamics when thinking about roles and responsibilities.

## Differences by Role Function

We found that leaders in certain functional areas of campus tend to lean into particular values or practices. Leaders in certain types of roles seem particularly well positioned to embody specific values or practices based on the work that they do. In this section, we first explore the values and practices that are especially salient to those in faculty roles and those in academic affairs roles such as deans, associate or assistant deans, provosts, directors of online learning or centers for teaching and learning, assessment, or other learning support programs. We then explore the ways that staff in varying types of roles display different parts of the shared equity leadership (SEL) model.<sup>4</sup> We found meaningful distinctions in a few staff areas: those in student-facing roles, those holding DEI-specific positions, those in fields or areas with historical legacies of exclusion, and those in boundary-spanning roles. For a summary of values and practices by functional role, see tables 1 and 2.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Staff roles are divided into many categories, and we did not always interview enough staff in a particular category to determine whether there were trends or themes for that area (for example, one campus may have had a leader in facilities who was integral to their SEL effort, but other campuses may not have included facilities staff on their teams).

5 Items that are blank, such as *vulnerability* or *implementing new approaches to accountability*, are not blank because no one used them; rather, they did not seem to differ based on functional role.

**TABLE 1. PRACTICES BY FUNCTIONAL ROLE**

		Faculty Roles	Academic Affairs Roles	Student-Facing Roles	DEI-Specific Roles	Roles in Fields or Units with Historical Legacies of Exclusion	Boundary-Spanning Roles
Relational Practices	Building Trust		✓		✓		
	Cultivating Positive Relationships		✓	✓	✓		✓
	Welcoming Disagreements and Tensions				✓		
Communication Practices	Using Language Intentionally					✓	✓
	Setting Expectations						✓
	Listening			✓			
Practices That Challenge the Status Quo	Diminishing Hierarchy				✓	✓	
	Questioning	✓				✓	
	Disrupting	✓			✓	✓	
Developmental Practices	Learning	✓					
	Helping Others Learn	✓	✓				
	Modeling	✓	✓		✓		
Structural Practices	Hiring Diverse Leaders		✓				
	Making Decisions with Systemic Lens		✓				
	Creating Rewards and Incentives		✓				
	Implementing New Approaches to Accountability						
Foundational Practice	Understanding and Centering Students' Needs			✓			

**TABLE 2. VALUES BY FUNCTIONAL ROLE**

	Faculty Roles	Academic Affairs Roles	Student-Facing Roles	DEI-Specific Roles	Roles in Fields or Units with Historical Legacies of Exclusion	Boundary-Spanning Roles
<b>Mutuality</b>				✓		✓
<b>Love and Care</b>			✓			
<b>Comfort with Being Uncomfortable</b>				✓	✓	
<b>Transparency</b>						✓
<b>Creativity and Imagination</b>				✓		
<b>Courage</b>	✓				✓	
<b>Accountability</b>	✓					
<b>Humility</b>						✓
<b>Vulnerability</b>						

## Faculty Roles

Faculty are a key part of SEL, as they play a meaningful role in creating and perpetuating organizational culture in a number of ways. As educators, their work in the classroom can either hinder or facilitate the creation of equitable and inclusive outcomes and environments for students (Beasley 2021; Kim and Sax 2017; Mayhew et al. 2016; Museus 2014). Additionally, their frequent and regular interactions with students give them a window into student needs and concerns that other campus actors simply do not have. Faculty also have responsibility for the curriculum and determine what gets taught and what is included or excluded, which can contribute to feelings of belonging and validation for students (Rendón 1994; Rendón and Muñoz 2011; Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann 2015; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Further, faculty have traditionally played a key leadership role on campus through shared governance systems—serving on and leading governance committees, search committees, academic senate, and other governance bodies (Rhoades 2005; Jones 2011). These aspects of the faculty role all influence the practices and values they lean into when participating in SEL.

First, faculty described leaning heavily on **developmental practices**, which seems appropriate given the faculty role in promoting student learning. As part of SEL, faculty not only supported student learning, but also that of their colleagues; in addition, faculty sometimes managed up to support the development of administrators. **Developmental practices** are important for SEL because continual learning and growth about equity issues is crucial in order to make progress both personally and institutionally and to ensure that changes to policies or practices really align with the problems at hand.

Faculty described how they learned from students' experiences and took that *learning* back to their colleagues in faculty and administration to advocate for change. For example, one faculty member described *learning* from students in her class that they did not feel well represented by the leaders in the student government association (SGA). On this particular campus—a minority serving institution—leaders in the SGA were students of color like most of their peers, but they tended to be wealthier and often did not have to hold jobs at the same time as attending school in order to support themselves or their families, as many other students did. Campus leadership had been depending heavily on input from SGA to drive policy and practice and ensure inclusion of student voice, but this feedback made them rethink whether they were truly getting representative voices at the table. As a result, this faculty member worked with colleagues to advocate for the creation of a student advisory council, with a much smaller and more manageable time commitment, that advises the cabinet, serves as a complement and a check on SGA, and ensures that more diverse student voices are represented in decision-making. We found many such examples of faculty who were not only *learning* from students, but also taking that learning to then either make change or advocate for change.

Faculty also *helped others learn* based on their personal, professional, or academic experiences that tied into issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). For example, one science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) faculty member at a public college described how he drew upon his previous professional experience at a state regulatory agency to read and interpret state regulations governing faculty autonomy to change the content of the curriculum. His colleagues' traditional interpretations of this regulation meant that faculty in his department always felt pressure to cover all the content in the general course outline approved by the state, regardless of whether students were actually mastering the content. This approach led to high failure rates in the department's courses and contributed to low persistence and completion rates, especially for



students of color and from low-income backgrounds. The faculty member we interviewed described how he helped educate his colleagues on the ways that state regulations are written and interpreted, which led them to reexamine the particular regulation about course content. Their reexamination led to a new interpretation that left room for autonomy in reteaching or revisiting concepts students were not mastering, even if it ultimately led to all the content not being covered. The faculty were in ongoing discussions about how they might advocate to change some of the course outlines to better align with student needs going forward. This faculty member used his professional expertise to *help colleagues learn* about equity issues in new ways.

Other faculty described using their academic or research expertise in fields such as sociology or anthropology to help colleagues think about issues of race and racism differently, especially when meeting with groups of faculty from many different disciplinary backgrounds or when serving on search committees with other faculty and administrators. Faculty also leveraged their leadership roles in shared governance to *help their colleagues learn* about equity issues. For example, one faculty member serving as a leader on the academic senate described how they partner with the campus's equity office to “give particular emphasis to trainings or workshops or conferences, or learning community opportunities that we think are particularly powerful. And we try to recruit people and we do a lot of shoulder tapping, messaging, even talking about it in the senate.” In addition to promoting formal learning opportunities as described in this quote, shared governance structures and committees provide an important venue for faculty to take their *learning* from students or from their professional or personal expertise and advocate for change.

Faculty serving in leadership roles on committees and in governance processes also played a key *modeling* role for their colleagues across the institution. For example, many faculty members we interviewed described consciously being equity advocates in their committee work, whether by ensuring that antibias procedures were followed on search committees, speaking up and calling out problematic assumptions made about students in governance committee meetings, or constantly calling for data disaggregated by race in academic

senate meetings. One faculty member of color described his committee work and the way he *models* advocacy for colleagues in those spaces:

I don't have an official role. I'm not a senate officer or a member of the Office of Equity or anything like that. I'm just a faculty of color who's just kind of been in the trenches for a very long time. I'm at the point in my career where I've just decided that I'm all in for cultural taxation, and when they say can you be on a committee I say yes, and when there's a committee where I look at it and say, "Hey, this needs better representation," I fight to get more voices on that committee. And if that's me, that's great. If that's somebody who's not me but the voice needs to be there, that's also great. So that's kind of the role I play—longtime faculty member who has the time and resources to step up.

By intentionally *modeling* what it looks like to be an equity advocate for their colleagues, these faculty hoped to shift individual and collective perceptions and behaviors to promote change more broadly. However, the faculty member quoted above was not suggesting that the work should be pushed onto faculty of color in general to represent others with similar identities. He (and we) caution against such actions, as there is ample evidence of the burden of cultural taxation for faculty of color who take on unpaid and unrecognized equity work (Anderson 2021; Arnold, Osanloo, and Newcomb 2021; Guillaume and Apodaca 2022; Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2020; Padilla 1994). Rather, the leader quoted above explicitly acknowledged his privileged position as a senior tenured faculty member that offered him protections not afforded to his junior, untenured faculty colleagues, especially those from racially minoritized backgrounds. He hoped to *model* that equity advocacy work coming from a place of strength and relative power, rather than having the work pushed on him against his will.<sup>6</sup>

Related to the above example, faculty also described using **practices that challenge the status quo**—namely *questioning* and *disrupting*. The faculty member quoted above describes how he *questioned* and *disrupted* traditional membership norms on committees, calling out the need for better representation and advocating for more people of color on committees across his institution. Critiquing and challenging conventional ways of thinking are part of academic culture, so these practices are a natural fit for faculty members socialized in academe. However, challenging the racial or gender status quo can be much more fraught than typical ways that faculty are used to challenging the status quo; there can be real risks involved, especially for faculty from minoritized backgrounds, so these practices require great *courage*. The faculty member quoted above noted that being both tenured and quite senior in his role made him feel more secure in *questioning* and *disrupting*, but faculty from minoritized backgrounds, junior faculty, or nontenured faculty may want to be more cautious in enacting these practices.

Faculty also described the importance of the value of *self-accountability*—holding themselves accountable for getting engaged in equity work and continuing to advocate, learn, and grow in the work whether it be their teaching, service, leadership, or research. This value is particularly important for faculty because the norms and values of academia do not generally reward or incentivize equity work. Advancement and success as a faculty member is often heavily driven by research productivity and, to a lesser extent, teaching, and even lesser still, service (O'Meara 2011). One faculty member described this dynamic: "We can get through and

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6 We examine issues of cultural taxation and emotional labor in SEL environments in more detail in a forthcoming report.

have great careers and not be at all concerned with [DEI] work, and I've seen so many faculty members who this is not part of their lives." Those faculty members who were engaged in SEL described being very internally driven to do the work and frequently checking in with themselves to make sure they were staying true to themselves and the value they place on doing equity work.

Ultimately, faculty members drew upon their strengths as teachers, learners and scholars, and leaders in shared governance to lean into **developmental practices** and **practices that challenge the status quo** when engaged in SEL. Their regular and frequent interactions with students and their professional and personal experiences helped them learn from one another, and this *learning* radiated out across the institution into interactions with colleagues and administrators, and ultimately, changes to policy and practice. Further, the faculty role in shared governance (especially those faculty with the security and privileges of tenure) gave them an opportunity to both *model* equity advocacy and challenge the status quo while also drawing on the values of *courage* and *self-accountability* to push the work forward.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a faculty member, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel faculty are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a faculty member, how have you seen or how could you see faculty leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## Academic Affairs Roles

Leaders in academic affairs roles include those who work in teaching and learning centers, online learning, assessment, deans' offices for a school or college, provost's offices, and sometimes academic support programs such as tutoring, among others. While these roles have some similarities to faculty roles—and indeed, many of the individuals in these roles came from the faculty ranks themselves—we also noted some distinctions in how these leaders emphasized different values and practices in the SEL model as they worked with colleagues to promote equity. These leaders primarily leaned into **relational practices** and **structural practices** as well as the **developmental practice** of *helping others learn*.

First, individuals in academic affairs roles leaned heavily into **relational practices**, especially *building trust* and *cultivating positive relationships*, as they worked closely with faculty members and others across campus to accomplish their equity goals. While these **relational practices** are key for all leaders who participate in SEL, they are especially important for academic affairs leaders. These leaders generally have no direct power or supervisory authority over faculty members, so the key to getting faculty to collaborate or participate in new equity initiatives often lies in more informal influence strategies like *cultivating positive relationships* and *building trust*. For example, one dean described the importance of the slow and steady work of *cultivating relationships* with faculty one-on-one. This individual relationship-building helped faculty *trust* in the dean's intentions; when he presented significant changes to faculty hiring and recruitment policies to promote more diverse and equitable hiring, there was little resistance among the faculty.



Academic affairs leaders are also in positions where they are connected to many different faculty and staff across departments and divisions, which means they have the potential to bring many more people into the fold for SEL if they have built strong enough relationships. Leaders described intentionally *building relationships* with other leaders in key offices like student affairs or DEI in order to minimize silos and strengthen capacity for doing equity work in their specific area, as this head of virtual learning described:

I made a strong connection with the Office of Equity that also houses professional development for our campus. . . . And that's been a critical partnership for us to help us understand how the online learning department was fitting into the campus culture, and what avenues we had for creating professional development opportunities, encouraging faculty to participate in those and really kind of giving us a focus of what it is that we're trying to do.

Academic affairs leaders also described the importance of *relationship-building* with colleagues or counterparts in similar positions or at similar levels in order to promote collaboration in service of equity goals. We noted several examples of deans of schools or colleges within a larger university having regular meetings or even text threads to discuss DEI issues; they would brainstorm how to handle these issues from their unique positions as academic leaders, while also creating some consistency across campus. For example, one dean described how the relationships he built with other deans on campus eventually led to the creation of a university-wide DEI certificate program, bringing together previously disparate courses related to social justice and equity across multiple schools and colleges. Similarly, associate or assistant deans in a single school or college also described developing strong relationships with their counterparts to better coordinate how they approached equity issues in their various spheres of responsibility (e.g., undergraduate and graduate education and faculty affairs).

Like faculty members, academic affairs leaders also emphasized **developmental practices**, especially *helping others learn*. These leaders often work closely with faculty members to promote learning and growth around DEI issues. Indeed, for many academic affairs leaders in our study, *helping others learn* was built into their roles and responsibilities, as this leader in a teaching and learning center described:

Honestly, I think because my role is focused around teaching and really thinking about teaching for inclusion and equity, it is very much embedded in the fabric of what we do. And so we're trying to really center equity—and I would say we're doing a shift from inclusion primarily as our focus to an equity focus at our center, whether it's the way that we're doing our workshop development, our training, to the way that we're doing internal training within our center. . . . So when I first stepped into this position, I . . . [noted that] . . . we're all kind of at different stages certainly, but we need to raise the overall level of consciousness and awareness for everyone.

These equity-specific trainings and workshops are key ways that academic affairs leaders promote learning with their faculty colleagues, but others also described using data as a tool to promote learning about equity. For example, examining course outcome data disaggregated by race helped faculty recognize patterns of inequity in the classroom or the curriculum that might otherwise go unrecognized and unresolved.

Finally, given the positional power and authority that many academic affairs leaders hold, they are well positioned to lean into some of the **structural practices** in ways that faculty were not able to access, practices such as *hiring diverse leaders*, *making decisions with a systemic lens*, and *creating rewards and incentives*. Several leaders in associate dean, dean, and provost positions described how they emphasize diverse and equitable hiring practices by rethinking search and interview processes and implementing antibias training for search committee members. Academic affairs leaders also described capitalizing on their positions at a program or institution level to infuse equity into processes and policies in more systemic and far-reaching ways. Sometimes this involved socializing an idea or practice so that it spread across the institution, as this community college leader noted when describing how they infused an equity lens into various parts of the assessment, curriculum, and planning processes:

And if we can affect the curriculum process, then maybe we can affect the program-level process. And if we can affect the program-level process, maybe we can affect guided pathways. And so it's like planting that seed really early and then explaining how all those initiatives that we're doing are actually connected pieces of that rotor that is pushing that information through. And . . . it mirrors that kind of spiral that we're talking about, where if you plant it in the very smallest of pieces, then it becomes a natural part of the rest of the things that we do that are really reflective practices.

Other times *making decisions with a systemic lens* simply involved coordination across multiple departments or divisions to minimize duplication of efforts and ensure alignment, such as the earlier example of creating a university-wide DEI certificate that encompassed courses from multiple schools and colleges. Academic affairs leaders are often positioned across multiple divisions or departments and so have an opportunity to see connections across units and be more systemic in their thinking than a faculty member situated in one department. For example, associate deans and deans participating in SEL described advocating for and implementing changes to annual evaluations to reward DEI work as a key part of their leadership. Rather than just creating opportunities for faculty and staff to participate in DEI work, these leaders were also thinking about how to *incentivize and reward* that participation, thus facilitating broader and more systemic change.

Overall, academic affairs leaders are leaning into *building relationships* and *trust* with faculty and peers, promoting development and opportunities to *help others learn*, and using their influence and position to enact **structural practices** and processes on campus to promote equity.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in academic affairs, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in academic affairs are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not an academic affairs leader, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

# Staff Roles

## Student-Facing Roles

We also found some distinctions in how staff in student-facing roles approach the SEL model. These leaders work directly with students and mostly—though not exclusively—include staff members in student affairs. This group leans particularly heavily on the foundational practice of **understanding and centering students’ needs**, as they are face-to-face with students on a daily basis. Their regular contact with students gives these leaders an inside glimpse of students’ lived experiences with discrimination and bias, illustrates the consequences of inequitable policies and practices, and illuminates areas of campus life that may be unintentionally contributing to inequitable outcomes. One strategy that student-facing leaders used to develop a strong understanding of students’ needs was to think through the ways students experience campus policies and practices, as this leader described:

One of the things that I did when I first landed on campus was try to understand how our students were receiving our services and our programs and if we were meeting their needs. And we had a very confusing, laborious intake process. I will admit it’s [still] not where we want it to be, but when I first came to [this campus] the graduation rate was horrible, and to me it starts with what are the entry points, and how are we getting students into the classroom through our onboarding practices, and are those welcoming, and does it help students to see themselves as college students, or does it reinforce some of the negativity that they may have experienced in their life due to marginalization or trauma? And that meant working with my leadership team to understand the lived experiences of our students and helping our staff and our faculty within the division understand the lived experiences of our students as well so that they cultivated the kind of empathy and patience to help students and to meet students where they were. We started talking about things like trauma-informed care and practice. What does that look like? Understanding how certain things can be triggers. Money, for example, can be a real trigger. So people who work in financial aid need to be caring, compassionate individuals and understand that when someone doesn’t have money that can be a source of shame for them and try to frame things and word things in ways that demonstrate that we’re here to help and that we want to help those students get the resources that they need.

By putting themselves in students’ shoes, these leaders could make changes to their practice (and help colleagues make changes) to better reflect students’ experiences and needs.

When in a collaborative or group environment, student-facing leaders consistently advocated for students’ perspectives and needs, as this leader described:

Every decision that I make has to be student-centered, and it has to be in the best interest of students. Now, does that mean that there were very challenging decisions to be made, that continue to be made? Yes, because somebody’s position may be obsolete, and am I making the right decision by serving that person, or am I

starving students or taking something away from students because I feel bad that that person's not going to have a position? And that's a pretty extreme case, but it helps me make the decisions much easier when I know every decision has to be student-centered.

This leader's comments show how even major decisions about staffing and budgets can be made with a student-centered lens. Leaders often remarked that centering students' needs can actually make challenging decisions like this easier; it provides an anchor or foundation upon which to make decisions that helps cut out competing demands and priorities to focus on students.

Further, student affairs leaders spoke of explicitly seeking student feedback and input in processes and decision-making in order to better understand their experiences and more accurately respond to their needs. Student-facing leaders seek direct input from students through a variety of means, including student advisory boards or groups, student focus groups, surveys, or even one-on-one meetings with students. One leader in enrollment management described how his division always runs any messaging about admissions, enrollment, or registration by actual students (generally student workers in their office) for feedback before sharing it widely. They ask students for input on things like tone, content of the message, clarity of instructions, and even ease of reading on a mobile device, all in order to make certain that they know what reactions students might have and what experiences or assumptions students might be bringing to the table when reading these messages. Another student affairs leader described the value of students directly sharing their experiences with staff:

And so just like this morning, I had a training for my division on microaggressions, and the people that I asked to lead that are people who have much to share from their own personal experience about microaggressions and the impact that those have had on them, and many times I often ask students to do that as well. Most student affairs professionals obviously have a soft spot for students, and so when they hear from them, "here's how these policies or here's how these procedures affect me," it can be really impactful.

Hearing directly from students can both highlight inequities and humanize an issue in ways that are very impactful for leaders.

*Listening* also emerged as a key practice here, as leaders reflected on the importance of *listening* to students' experiences and input in order to better understand what students need, rather than just what staff and administrators might think they need. Student affairs leaders apply these practices in their conversations with leaders in other roles across campus. Other leaders depend on student-facing leaders for their direct connection to students' lived experiences and perspectives.

Student affairs leaders also described *cultivating positive relationships* with the students they serve and operating with a value of *love and care*. Many leaders spoke about developing genuine caring relationships with students. They try to lead with *love and care* when making decisions that affect students, whether considering how a new financial aid policy might differentially affect students of different races or socioeconomic backgrounds, reflecting on all of the challenges students had been facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, or even just being mindful of the regular stressors of class and schoolwork when planning activities or events. These

leaders are role models for other leaders in different spaces for putting *love and care* front and center in their work, as this leader describes:

For example, I would say our vice president for student affairs [(VPSA)], unsurprisingly, is, you know, off the scale with the love and care, and our president, too, for that matter. Whereas, you know . . . I do a lot of the entrepreneurial work, so certainly creativity and innovation are important for my work. But, you know, I don't think I'm un-empathetic or uncaring or unloving, and our [VPSA is] certainly not uncreative, so there's different levels.

This leader's quote is a cogent encapsulation of how the SEL values are universal, yet they may be emphasized more by leaders in some particular roles than in others—what he refers to as “different levels” of how leaders in different roles might enact different practices or values. Ultimately, student affairs leaders' direct work with students leads them to regularly **center students' needs**, *build strong relationships*, *listen* to their experiences, and operate with a value of *love and care* in their work.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in a student-facing role, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in student-facing roles are particularly well-positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a leader in a student-facing role, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## DEI-Specific Roles

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many leaders who participate in SEL have DEI-specific roles. These include chief diversity officers (CDOs); school- or college-specific DEI officers; and specialists, directors, or associate deans with DEI as their primary responsibility (Williams 2013; Williams and Wade-Golden 2013). Leaders in these roles emphasized specific elements across the SEL model, including helping people on their *personal journeys*; *modeling* several SEL values such as *mutuality*, *creativity and imagination*, and *comfort with being uncomfortable*; and enacting **relational practices** and **practices that challenge the status quo** in order to accomplish their goals.

First, leaders in DEI-specific roles played a key role in supporting colleagues on their *personal journeys toward critical consciousness*. Methods of support often included a focus on creating spaces and programming to support learning and growth around equity issues and making time for reflection and discussion with colleagues, as this leader described:

There's a person that I'm kind of mentoring and the person is just sort of entering the DEI field and is noticing that her own identities really impact whether she's perceived as trusted, competent, or even genuinely caring about this. . . . I do think that DEI professionals could use some support in thinking about how to navigate

their own identities in this space. . . . But that is definitely one space where I feel like I'm giving a lot of support, especially to people who are entering the field. Yeah, just offering space for them to talk and to emote, to express how that feels, and to do it in a way that is really confidential, as it needs to be, where you can build trust. . . . But I have to have some awareness of identity development myself and identity development models and the politics of the profession to be able to guide somebody through those feelings and to keep them encouraged.

These leaders in DEI-specific roles had the expertise and skill to do this sort of one-on-one coaching and mentoring to help their colleagues build critical consciousness. They described the importance of being present, open, and nonjudgmental with their colleagues in these spaces, the benefit of letting them really explore their identities and experiences, and the need for experimenting with new ideas and approaches in these spaces. Other DEI leaders spoke about more broadly establishing expectations on campus that equity work should be personal; leaders across campus should advocate for and do this personal journey work and then make it public when in conversation with other leaders.

Additionally, DEI leaders frequently *modeled* or embodied several SEL values—specifically *mutuality*, *creativity and imagination*, and *comfort with being uncomfortable*. In terms of *mutuality*, DEI leaders described the importance of notions of mutual respect and reciprocity when working with different constituent groups across campus—honoring the contributions of longtime activists and thinking about how to not just take (ideas, emotions, or time) from the people doing equity work across campus but also how to pour into them, lift them up, and ensure that their work is not in vain so they also benefit from doing the work.

DEI leaders also relied heavily on *creativity and imagination* in their work, as they endeavored to rethink and redesign existing structures, policies, and processes in entirely new ways to promote equitable outcomes, as this leader noted:

So it's about changing the way we do things, instead of adding to what other people are already doing. So I don't know, for example, we have to recruit students. And so we don't want to, on top of that, add recruiting students of color, recruiting all these students who are not represented in [our fields]. But I said, well, we have to recruit students. How can we do this in a way that can humanize the students who we are trying to recruit? What are the things that are benefiting people who have access and privilege that are not benefiting the folks who don't have access or are more marginalized? And so it's really about changing the way that we do things.

DEI leaders combine their specialized knowledge and experience with *creativity and imagination* to rethink what processes like student recruitment could look like to promote more equitable outcomes.

Additionally, DEI leaders described the importance of having *comfort with being uncomfortable*. These values are somewhat uncommon in Western, White, or patriarchal approaches to leadership, so having DEI leaders *model* them for their colleagues is important in order to make progress on equity goals:

There's a big theme in our culture that everything is terrific and excellent. And so [DEI] is work that has a lot of challenges and some defeated feelings connected to it before there's something you would identify as progress and achievement. So being able to sit with what's uncomfortable and [identifying] the real obstacles in [your] environment is crucial.

As this leader points out, sitting in this environment of discomfort and not jumping immediately to solutions, masking over problems, or avoiding challenges is a really important piece of equity work.

Similarly, DEI leaders relied on the **relational practice** of *welcoming disagreements and tensions*, as there were often tensions and disagreements around the best approaches to equity work or even what equity goals should look like. One leader at a campus with well-established SEL processes noted that “we have lots of debates around how to do it, and depending where people are in their journey of growth, but there’s no question that the DEI is important.” This quote shows how even on campuses where stakeholders are united in their sense of the importance of doing equity work disagreements are natural and normal, especially in a shared leadership environment with multiple voices and perspectives working together. DEI leaders helped to normalize these tensions and disagreements and manage them respectfully. Given their background in DEI issues, these leaders were able to provide rationale for the value of disagreements and draw upon their skills in managing conflicting viewpoints.

DEI leaders also depended on the other **relational practices** of *building trust* and *cultivating positive relationships* as they worked closely with faculty members and others across campus to accomplish their equity goals. Similar to the academic affairs leaders we discussed earlier, DEI leaders have little direct power or supervisory authority over the faculty and staff they work with on a regular basis. As one leader noted: “My role with those groups is really about . . . we can’t really tell them what to do, so we move and we model and provide examples” instead of being more directive. **Relational practices** are a key strategy to cultivate influence and build coalitions in the absence of formal power and authority, as well as to navigate disagreements. DEI leaders described the importance of partnering and collaborating with colleagues and units across campus in order to accomplish their goals. Additionally, DEI work is emotional and personal work, and trust is essential in order to operate in those spaces. For example, one DEI leader described the ways that *cultivating trust* with marginalized groups across campus helped promote buy-in among faculty and staff who had become disillusioned and burned out after years of feeling alone in doing equity work. As a result of working carefully and over long periods of time to build trust, this leader was able to reengage the disillusioned faculty and staff and bring their important skills and experiences back into the fold.

DEI leaders also leaned into **practices that challenge the status quo** in the spaces they work in. DEI leaders were well positioned to enact these practices, as DEI work is often inherently counter to the status quo in higher education. One leader described how she often *disrupted* traditional ways of operating on her campus by “going against the grain and raising perspectives or frames that aren’t normative and often aren’t appreciated” in order to bring attention to ways that the current practices were inhibiting equity. She described how her colleagues often depended on her to play that disruptive role, even when it was not comfortable, in order to ensure that their team did not have blind spots and was attentive to barriers to the equity goals they were pursuing.

In addition to *disrupting*, DEI leaders also spoke about challenging the status quo by *diminishing hierarchy*. One DEI leader described how he was working to *diminish hierarchy* through the process of data sharing in his organization. After facilitating a DEI climate survey, rather than sharing the results with senior



administrators first, this leader and his team made the conscious decision to share results with everyone at once—senior-level and ground-level leaders—in order to equalize how information was shared:

And we felt like that would build on a notion of mistrust that we have in our organization where people will feel that administrators would only use that space in time to frame the results in a way that makes them look favorable by giving them time to get the story straight and different things like that. And so we wanted to remove that notion of distrust and have everyone try to sit together in community and get in those results. . . . So once again, we're trying to level the playing field, and our leaders feel more part of the organization instead of on Mount Olympus looking down at the organization as if they are the saviors of everything.

DEI leaders leaned into values and practices that were both openly subversive and challenging of the status quo and also endeavored to work within the system to help slowly expand their colleagues' critical consciousness and support of equity goals.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in a DEI-specific role, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in DEI-specific roles are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a leader in a DEI-specific role, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*



## Expanding Equity Work to New Roles: Facilities

What does it look like to lead for equity in areas that we don't traditionally associate with DEI work? The following is a snapshot of how to lead for equity in facilities roles.

In higher education, facilities leaders are responsible for the “management of land, buildings, and equipment” (Daigneau, n.d.). This can include dormitories, office and classroom buildings, recreation centers and dining halls, green spaces, and more. Leaders in these staff positions may not have regular contact with students and faculty, but they do spend considerable time thinking about campus budgets and finances as they work to increase efficiency in planning and use of campus spaces and resources. Leaders in facilities roles may not normally be the go-to people for campus DEI work, but in our study we noted several examples of how these leaders can play an important role in thinking about equity and expanding the ways that colleges and universities understand and define equity. For example, a facilities leader on one campus described the importance of physical space in creating a certain type of climate on campus for students, faculty, and staff. This leader described how staff who ran a longtime support program for low-income students had their offices in one of the oldest buildings on campus, compared with the offices for a new donor-funded program that were located in a brand-new building:

The heat rattles, the office hasn't gotten any new furniture in 15 years, they have no storage space, they're shoved into this building that nobody wants to be in. I kept saying we've got to do something for them, because they feel—they're upset, that staff is upset, because they're not getting the same resources that the [new] program is getting. So, here comes this new, shiny program, and [meanwhile] they're sitting on chairs that are disgusting, carpets that haven't been replaced, lights that are falling apart, the heat is rattling, and they're feeling some kind of way about the inequity between the two programs. . . . I'm like, how do we have students coming in here and experiencing this? Like, the students come into the offices, and it's disgusting. It doesn't feel good for the staff and the students to be there.

This leader went on to describe how they advocated with senior leadership to secure funding for an office refresh. In the scheme of the overall facilities budget, this funding was minor, but the updates to the physical space made a huge difference to the staff and students in the program and made them feel more valued. Facilities leaders already think a lot about the look and feel of spaces on campus, and they potentially have a lot to share about the ways that physical space can influence whether students, faculty, and staff feel included and valued, or whether decisions about space use could feel inequitable to different groups.

Many campuses already included their facilities leaders in extended planning teams during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic as they transitioned to hybrid or remote operations and again once in-person learning resumed. There may already be existing relationships to build upon to engage facilities leaders more closely in DEI work.

## Expanding Equity Work to New Roles: Finance

What does it look like to lead for equity in areas that we don't traditionally associate with DEI work? The following is a snapshot of how to lead for equity in finance roles.

Fundraising and development staff in higher education are in charge of cultivating, soliciting, and managing donations to their institutions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. While “voluntary support of American higher education has been part of the American ethos since the founding of the colonial colleges,” private giving is becoming increasingly important as operating costs rise and government funding continues to decline (Drezner 2011, ix). In recent years, as DEI work has become an increasing campus priority, advancement leaders have called for the need to build a more diverse workforce as well as the need to deeply examine the ways in which structural racism may be shaping their work (Bohland 2021; Grant and Schiller 2020; Martin 2020). Fundraising and development leaders in our study shared several examples of how they are thinking about equity in their work—from who they hire and promote, to who they ask for money and how, to even the ways they define giving, as this leader described:

But then as we move more broadly, you know, some of the practices that we're looking at are how are we investing our time with our alumni and donors? How is that determined using all kinds of wealth measures? Is that one of the areas where we need disruption? Should we be thinking differently about how we identify alumni and donors of color to be engaged? How do we open our doors more broadly? How are we more creative in the opportunities for supporting the university and engaging with the university? Some of us on the task force are more familiar now with cultures of giving in communities of color, some traditions of giving in communities of color. And how do we embrace some of that in the university setting to make a pathway for those who want to be engaged, but may not be the Elon Musk of the world, or, you know, others who have great means?

The sorts of questions this leader posed can help fundraising staff in a variety of campus settings think about their work differently and reflect on the role they have to play as equity leaders on campus and in the fundraising profession at large. These questions can also help other leaders on campus think about the ways their colleagues in development can contribute to their campus's overall equity agenda.

## Expanding Equity Work to New Roles: Fundraising

What does it look like to lead for equity in areas that we don't traditionally associate with DEI work? The following is a snapshot of how to lead for equity in fundraising roles.

Higher education business and finance leaders are responsible for a range of tasks involving their campus's planning and budgeting, endowment management, accounting and taxation, procurement, and more (West 2000). They play an integral role in the day-to-day functioning and long-term sustainability of all core university functions. They can also be gatekeepers or facilitators for new programs or financial priorities, such as DEI-related efforts. Business and finance leaders lack diversity in their ranks—60 percent of top leaders are male and nearly 90 percent are White (NACUBO 2021)—and may not typically be campus champions or leaders in DEI efforts. In our study, however, we spoke with several leaders in business and finance who demonstrated strong advocacy for equity work and shared important lessons about how to use their roles to drive change. One leader described how they always try to examine financial policies through the lens of how they affect the neediest students on campus. By centering the most marginalized groups of students in decision-making, finance leaders help humanize their planning and budgeting processes and make more equity-minded decisions. Leaders also spoke of their role in keeping financial decisions equity-focused to ensure that resources are allocated in ways that align with the campus's mission around DEI. For example, one senior finance leader described how they reflect carefully with colleagues on how a particular program may or may not align with their campus's equity goals:

I definitely think my role is different because I think everything that everyone raises a terrific idea for pursuing equity that I get excited about, but I also think, "Oh, my gosh. That's more money; how are we going to do that?" . . . [That's] why it's important to have the highest level of leadership in those kinds of conversations, right, so they're standing behind [when we say], "We chose to do this and not that because this is directly in line with our equity goals and that is adjacent to our equity goals." But I do also ask as a finance person, how do we sustain that and are we sure we can't do it with what we have now? Can we think about collaboration? Could we provide better service to this population if we leverage something happening over here? I do ask those questions a lot.

Without effective financial support and planning, campuses will struggle to create equity-focused change that is truly transformative and sustainable. Business and finance leaders thus have a critically important role to play in SEL environments, as they help secure tangible resources to support new DEI efforts, sustain existing efforts, and seek areas for connection and collaboration to best leverage the limited resources that every campus struggles to manage.



## Roles in Units and Fields with Historical Legacies of Exclusion

We also noticed a trend toward particular types of practices among leaders who held roles in fields and units that often lack diversity and have historically excluded women and people of color, such as business and finance, fundraising, or STEM (Gonzales et al. 2021; Lobato, Enter, and Walz 2021; Ong, Smith, and Ko 2018). Leaders in these roles included both faculty and staff, and they tended to lean heavily into **practices that challenge the status quo** in order to promote equity goals within these spaces. These fields and units often have deeply embedded policies and norms that run counter to many equity goals and also contain pockets of strong resistance to changes that would make things more equitable. These tensions were challenging to navigate for equity leaders in these fields, which also tend to have disproportionately White and male faculty or staff. One leader in fundraising and development described the environment in this way:

It's no secret if you look at [universities] around the country in the philanthropy space, most of them are led by White men. I mean, it's not welcoming of women. It's not welcoming of people of color. So, you know, I sort of got to a point in my life where I stopped caring what the White men think of, because like, you know, I just don't care anymore because it's not—you know, they're never going to open the doors for me or for people who aren't typically in. So I might as well just rattle their cages and force the doors open because that's going to be a faster way for me to see the changes that I want to see.

While this example is specific to development and fundraising, faculty and staff in other units or fields with a historical legacy of exclusion described similar environments. The cage-rattling described by this leader aligns with what we heard from other leaders who reported that they needed to frequently *ask questions* and

*disrupt* the status quo, and they have to actively work to diminish hierarchy in order to make headway with SEL work. The type of *questioning* might differ from space to space, but it ranged from *questioning* as a sort of gentle nudge, or a tool to draw attention to potential inequities in spaces where open discussion might not be welcomed, to more overt *questioning* of existing policies or practices, and ultimately to *questioning* as a tool to signal engagement and interest in spaces where it might not otherwise be expected, as one finance leader described:

I think my asking a lot of questions let people know that I cared about, was interested, and may have something to contribute to problem solving around these issues of equity. And I think [in my role] everyone [assumes I only care about] the money, but it's not just that. I think the fact that I'm even in this conversation with you . . . I think my colleagues see that, too, and so they're often [adding me to other equity conversations as well] . . . Some of it's just been relationship building, but I think it's the way I kind of showed up asking questions, being curious, wanting to understand, asking for data. I do that a lot.

While *questioning* was an important practice for leaders in any role, leaders in these types of roles often had a lot more existing inequitable structures and practices to navigate; asking questions helped them unpack some of these longstanding norms and processes.

In addition to *questioning*, leaders in these areas described numerous examples of how they work in more overt ways to *disrupt* the status quo. Several leaders described surfacing issues of gender-based salary inequities in their settings, while other leaders described how they worked with colleagues to reflect upon and question existing approaches to defining excellence or achievement in their fields and whether those definitions were themselves hindering equitable outcomes.

While hierarchy and privilege were challenges for leaders in almost all roles, leaders in these spaces described needing to work even more intentionally to not only *diminish hierarchies*, but also to lift up and center people without positional authority or power. One leader in a business school setting described how he worked to break down hierarchies:

So back when I was younger . . . I was on a dean's council. And I come up with an idea. And no one listened to the idea. Then the guy next to me pretty much says the same idea, and everyone says, "Oh, that's great." And a colleague of mine says to me, "You know, you said the same thing. The difference is, he has an MBA and you don't." And I sit there and go, "I don't know why my idea is any worse because I have less education under my belt." But there is a perception of that. And I was very much aware of that when I was younger, and I try to sit there [now] and make sure that there's nothing silly like that getting in the way of a good idea, getting in the way of a good discussion. I don't care if the idea is coming from the janitors as opposed to the idea is coming from the president himself. A good idea, a good process, a good practice, is the same, no matter who it's coming from.

This leader's personal experiences with very hierarchical spaces that center those with advanced degrees and silence those without led to his active work to break down hierarchies in his work today.

Leaders in these spaces also described the importance of *using language intentionally* to get their colleagues on board with DEI work. For example, staff in finance or business affairs described how to build a business case for diversifying their teams or for building in rewards for DEI work to faculty and staff evaluation processes, rather than depending on arguments rooted in morality or justice. Similarly, faculty and staff in STEM fields described using data and language rooted in evidence and the scientific method when advocating for equity-based changes to curriculum or practice. By intentionally tailoring their language to fit what they knew their audiences value and prioritize, equity leaders in these spaces could build support more broadly.

In addition to the practices described above, leaders in fields and units with historical legacies of exclusion leaned heavily into the values of *courage* and *comfort with being uncomfortable*. It took *courage* to disrupt and draw attention to inequities and challenges to existing ways of operating, especially for women and people of color in spaces that remain predominantly White and male. There was real risk involved for these individuals in terms of their social positioning and their livelihood when they decided to speak up and challenge the status quo. Similarly, it was often very *uncomfortable* to interrogate the ways in which one's taken-for-granted practices had been perpetuating inequitable outcomes, as this leader noted:

I always talk about how leaders have to take personal responsibility and often times, it's not comfortable. So I tell people . . . they have to be brave and [think about] what does it mean to critically reassess your past and current practices and be willing to change them when things catch you off guard? I mean, things still catch us off guard. We had a conversation several months ago about financial holds and so students couldn't register for their next semester of classes because we had financial holds. And we realized one of the holds was like a \$200 fee for healthcare or health insurance. We were like, wait a minute. Can't we figure out how to do this differently? . . . And it wasn't that it was intentional to—pardon my language, but—screw students. But really, it was just something that had [always] been done.

By bravely confronting inequities—and facing the ways that leaders may have inadvertently been complicit in perpetuating them, even when it feels uncomfortable—leaders in these spaces help to move equity work forward in fields that have continued to struggle to diversify and produce equitable outcomes.

Being an equity leader in a field with a long history and continued legacy of exclusion of women and people of color often means a fundamental reexamination of traditional ways of operating in spaces where women and people of color are still quite underrepresented. The **practices that challenge the status quo** and SEL values help equity leaders in these spaces draw attention to existing inequities and suggest (or demand) new ways of working together to make change.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in a field or unit with historical legacies of exclusion, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in fields or units with historical legacies of exclusion are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a leader in one of these fields or units, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## Boundary-Spanning Roles

Leaders in boundary-spanning roles—those who frequently worked across organizational boundaries (Aldrich and Herker 1977; Ancona and Caldwell 1992; Bess and Dee 2008), especially with community partners—depended strongly on **relational** and **communication practices** to navigate the different spaces they worked within.<sup>7</sup> Because their work crossed organizational boundaries and was not necessarily formalized in structures or processes, these leaders described the importance of *cultivating positive relationships* both internally and with external partners to facilitate the work across boundaries. One leader who runs a college access program described the importance of developing strong relationships with leaders of other college access programs on campus in order to better align efforts and not compete for funding or influence:

So now in my leadership [role] . . . I know [the head of another college access program] and I kind of have a sense of how she works and so I'm intentionally kind of going to her to try to check in on conversations I'm having around the city with schools and with other entities that might or might not be in her wheelhouse so that . . . I'm able to work with her proactively. . . . So it's really a lot of navigation of expectations both on the senior level, staff here, [external partners], and also knowing in some respects honestly, which I think I've told her, there's some things that she's running that I think would be better served by us and likewise she thought that there was some stuff that we've been running that would be better served by her.

The strong relationships this leader developed with her counterpart enabled them to work well together and be honest with one another about how to better structure their work and responsibilities. Similarly, boundary-spanning leaders described the importance of developing strong relationships with external or community partners in order to facilitate the often tricky task of working across very different organizations.

Boundary-spanning leaders also described having to *use language intentionally* with partner organizations such as governmental, military, or K–12 organizations that might be very different from that which they use internally with their own teams on campus, as this leader recounted:

It's a very difficult balance between running a program with the kind of—with the number of partners, especially the kind of partners that we have. [Our community partner organization] is extremely hierarchical. . . . So the only way that they talk is top-down, like, "We will set the policy. They will do the policy." And there's no, like, "Let's solicit the team for their opinions." It's, "Let's set the agenda and let's keep it moving." So you kind of have to operate in that realm when you're working with them, otherwise you lose confidence. But when you're at the university, things are very different. There's questions of shared governance. There's questions of research and best practices, and now, even more, kind of pressure to think about how to cultivate staff, especially from a DEI perspective, like, "Are we kind of meeting the needs of our team? Are we able to kind of pull from the diverse strengths that they're bringing?" So it's like you have to shift gears constantly in this role. But I make a very conscious decision or attempt to do that.

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7 Often, boundary-spanning roles also happen across internal boundaries—for example, between academic affairs and student affairs, or among academic departments. Internal boundary-spanning overlapped almost entirely with the mid-level leader category, however, so we describe those findings in the section on mid-level leaders below.

This leader and colleagues in similar roles often described using very different language or framing with their own teams. The ability to communicate effectively and flexibly across different levels of the organization and beyond organizational boundaries is critical for leaders in boundary-spanning roles.

Similarly, the value of *mutuality* was critical for leaders in boundary-spanning roles. Because universities have traditionally been seen as bastions of privilege that are often disconnected from the lives of local community members or even exploitative of them, leaders involved in community-engaged work described the critical importance of truly partnering with local community members instead of doing things for them or to them. One leader described their understanding of what mutuality meant:

So [our] equity agenda is a very active one. It's an activist one. But it's not one that's just about the university bringing its unique resources to a space and place. But it's about creating tables of collaboration, where we can do that, but at the same time we're changing ourselves inwardly. And it's interesting because I think that's the area where we're most devoid of real insight and understanding, because the idea of equity work is always, in my view, I would say it's like an I-it. It's the I-it equation. We're [the university] the I, and the people are the it. But, when you create tables of collaboration, it's always we-us. So, the we and us are constantly, it's a dialectical relationship, and the we and us are constantly embroiling each other in complementary ways, and sometimes even contradictory or inconsistent ways because we're still having to learn the essence of each other. But that's hard work. And I call it both revolutionary and evolutionary. Most universities are not, they don't at least publicly say that they're interested in that kind of thing. But we are.

Boundary-spanning leaders had the especially challenging task of navigating both internal organizational equity goals and the goals and priorities of external or community partners. The values and practices they foregrounded helped them collaborate more effectively.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in a boundary-spanning role, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in boundary-spanning roles are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a boundary-spanning leader, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*





## Differences by Role or Position in the Organizational Hierarchy

In addition to the different values and practices that were particularly useful for individuals in specific functional areas, we found that a leader's position in the organizational hierarchy also influenced the values and practices they leaned on or even were able to enact. Leaders have different agency around doing equity work depending on where they are situated within the organizational hierarchy. For example, ground-level or mid-level leaders may have limited abilities to enact some of the **structural practices** such as *creating new rewards and incentive structures* for shared equity leadership (SEL), whereas senior leaders have the power and authority—even the responsibility—to do these things. In this section, we first describe the importance of senior leaders prioritizing the practice of *diminishing hierarchy*, and then we will outline the ways that senior leaders are well positioned to take responsibility for the **structural practices** needed to enact SEL. Senior leaders also play a significant role in *modeling* some of the SEL values that are countercultural to traditional ways of operating within our institutions such as *vulnerability* and *humility*, as well as embodying the values of *transparency* and *accountability*. We then describe how mid-level leaders go about the challenging task of navigating different values and practices at different times depending on who they are working with (more senior leaders or ground-level leaders). Finally, we describe how ground-level leaders are well positioned to enact **developmental practices** and **relational practices**, as well as *modeling* what these practices look like for leaders in other roles. For an overview of the values and practices that leaders enact based on their position in the organizational hierarchy, see tables 3 and 4.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Items that are blank, such as love and care, are not blank because no one used them; rather, they were more universal and did not seem to differ by role or position in the organizational hierarchy.

**TABLE 3. PRACTICES BY POSITION IN ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY**

		Senior-Level Roles	Mid-level Roles	Ground-Level Roles
<b>Relational Practices</b>	<b>Building Trust</b>			✓
	<b>Cultivating Positive Relationships</b>			✓
	<b>Welcoming Disagreements and Tensions</b>		✓	
<b>Communication Practices</b>	<b>Using Language Intentionally</b>		✓	
	<b>Setting Expectations</b>	✓		
	<b>Listening</b>		✓	
<b>Practices That Challenge the Status Quo</b>	<b>Diminishing Hierarchy</b>	✓		
	<b>Questioning</b>	✓	✓	
	<b>Disrupting</b>			
<b>Developmental Practices</b>	<b>Learning</b>			
	<b>Helping Others Learn</b>		✓	✓
	<b>Modeling</b>		✓	
<b>Structural Practices</b>	<b>Hiring Diverse Leaders</b>	✓		
	<b>Making Decisions with Systemic Lens</b>	✓	✓	
	<b>Creating Rewards and Incentives</b>	✓		
	<b>Implementing New Approaches to Accountability</b>	✓		
<b>Foundational Practice</b>	<b>Understanding and Centering Students' Needs</b>			

**TABLE 4. VALUES BY POSITION IN ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY**

	Senior-Level Roles	Mid-level Roles	Ground-Level Roles
<b>Mutuality</b>			
<b>Love and Care</b>			
<b>Comfort with Being Uncomfortable</b>			
<b>Transparency</b>	✓		
<b>Creativity and Imagination</b>			✓
<b>Courage</b>			
<b>Accountability</b>	✓		
<b>Humility</b>	✓	✓	
<b>Vulnerability</b>	✓		

## Senior-Level Roles

While SEL works to share leadership more broadly and break down hierarchies, the fact remains that colleges, universities, and our society at large remain hierarchically oriented, and leaders in senior or executive roles in the organizational hierarchy have power and authority that other leaders simply do not. Senior-level leaders include presidents (see the callout box for more specifics on presidents); provosts; and other cabinet-level leaders such as the chief financial officers, chief student affairs officers, vice presidents for admissions and advancement, chief diversity officers, and, on some campuses, deans. These leaders are uniquely well positioned to enact several practices that may require a certain degree of power or decision-making authority (Kezar 2014; Holcombe et al. 2021; Williams 2013). For example, senior leaders are well positioned to take the lead on *diminishing hierarchy* in an SEL environment. Leaders with less power and privilege in these spaces are not able to do this work of breaking down hierarchies in the same way, as they might fear potential repercussions to their livelihoods or level of influence. Several executive-level leaders described how they take specific actions to diminish hierarchy in spaces with leaders who have differing levels of power and authority, such as seating colleagues in a circle instead of at a table with a seat at the head, offering to take on service roles in meetings such as note-taking or even serving food, or hosting meals in their home. One leader described how taking on frontline roles helped to break down barriers among the staff and minimize hierarchies:

So, I will say—this is going to sound strange, but . . . I believe being on the front line with the team and seeing that they're seeing that I'm willing to do what they're doing and I'm willing to learn what they're willing to learn and I'm willing to do what they're willing to do has helped kind of create that [environment]. Your team—it's not by management by walking around. It's managing by doing and being alongside folks. I think that my team sees that. That opens some conversations.

These intentional actions helped minimize power differentials and create spaces where those with less power and privilege felt comfortable contributing and speaking honestly. Similarly, senior leaders described how intentionally lifting up the contributions of their direct reports and sharing credit helped to elevate more junior leaders in the eyes of campus leadership and further contributed to breaking down hierarchies, as this leader pointed out:

I'm often looking for ways in which to promote folks who might not be at the most senior level, but are you know, sort of the level actually at any level of the organization. And I'm always looking for ways to bring diverse voices, diverse perspectives into important dialogues. . . . I take joy in being the quiet partner and letting someone else shine who might not normally have a chance to shine.

Senior leaders also play a key *questioning* role with other leaders and with their direct reports, especially using *questioning* as “a strategy to gently guide their colleagues to question dominant practices and policies” (Kezar et al. 2021, 24). By asking lots of questions carefully designed to challenge assumptions and ways of operating that are often taken for granted, senior leaders can elicit cooperation and collaboration from their colleagues without taking a more forceful or directive approach, which might discourage the type of collaboration necessary for SEL.

Senior leaders described the importance of *setting expectations for the long term* when doing equity work.



Their positions of authority meant that they were well situated to help others understand that larger systemic changes are necessary to make institutions more equitable and that such changes take time. This expectation-setting could include creating longer-term DEI planning processes to account for the longer time frame required to create meaningful structural changes, or might be repeatedly emphasizing to members of their teams that equity work takes time and short-term quick fixes were not the goal. Making these expectations clear and explicit helped minimize frustration when changes were taking longer than stakeholders may have liked.

Senior leaders also have the power and authority necessary to enact the **structural practices** associated with SEL: *hiring diverse leaders*, *making decisions with a systemic lens*, *creating rewards and incentives*, and *implementing new approaches to accountability*. By their very nature, these practices require a degree of power to implement. For example, while the average assistant professor may serve on hiring or search committees, they do not have the same level of decision-making authority as an executive-level leader would when it comes to creating new positions or implementing new equity-minded search procedures. By contrast, senior leaders can ensure that they *hire diverse leaders*, which both brings the benefits of diversity to the table in terms of decision-making and also is a powerful symbol that senior leaders are serious about the work. Similarly, while ground-level leaders can advocate for the *creation of rewards and incentives* for engaging in SEL or for new accountability mechanisms to keep people engaged in the work, it is those at the senior level of the organization who actually have the ability and influence to change these structures. Senior leaders have the power to allocate and commit resources to equity-related issues, whether through new positions or offices, rewards or incentives for participating in DEI work, diverse hiring initiatives, and more. In terms of *creating new approaches to accountability*, they can assign specific DEI goals to specific members of their teams or take on certain goals themselves, and they can encourage and support the creation of new accountability systems in their divisions and departments. They also *make decisions with a systemic lens* by looking across the many different parts of their institutions to connect pockets of existing equity work or “random acts of equity,” as one leader referred to them. Building equity into many existing institutional practices and policies, whether by using existing campus professional development days to do DEI trainings or by ensuring that DEI goals

are connected to other important institutional goals, senior leaders can ensure that equity becomes pervasive instead of random. Senior leaders need to remain mindful of the ways in which they can make these structural changes that can lay the groundwork for effective SEL work and focus on the ways in which they can engage in these **structural practices**.

We also found that the values of *transparency* and *accountability* were especially important for senior leaders. *Transparency* or openness about why decisions are made or why a certain demand could not be met helped senior leaders build trust with faculty, staff, and students, even if they did not ultimately agree with the decision that the leader made. And senior leaders who *held themselves publicly accountable* for and made efforts to repair mistakes or missteps generated goodwill and trust; this helped campus stakeholders feel more confident in their commitment to following through on equity goals. Senior leaders who operated with these values at the forefront were able to build support and buy-in across the institution. When senior leaders are *transparent* and *hold themselves publicly accountable*, campus stakeholders can trust that these senior leaders mean what they say and that they authentically support equity work.

Finally, senior leaders played an important role in embodying values that are countercultural to normative ways of operating in higher education such as *vulnerability* and *humility*, as this leader pointed out:

This is those core values of vulnerability and humility and self-accountability. Those are things that we're otherwise trained—you know, in the White man's world you're trained not to have those things. Male culture, masculine culture, considers all those things weaknesses, right? So, we're also combating that. I think when we talk about diversity, we have to think about gendering as well. We're not just a White world, we're a White man's world, and we have to unpack that. We have to be committed to unpacking that in everything we do, if we're truly going to have equity. . . . I guess what I'm getting at is that in a certain sense, what I've been trying to do on [our president's] behalf is train people out of the prevailing cis White male organizational mindset. That with my colleagues who are Black, who are female, who are Indian, South Asian, who are Latino or Latina, I think that it probably means something for them to hear that kind of message from me [as a White man]. . . . But it is important that they understand that that is my agenda, and that is [the president's] agenda, and it is our organizational agenda, and that we are going to break down those walls and barriers together.

Senior leaders embodying these values helped signal across campus that this work was an authentic, meaningful institutional priority—not just lip service without intention or action to change.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a leader in a senior role, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel leaders in senior roles are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a senior-level leader, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## Presidents

As the most senior leader on a college campus, presidents play a critical role in SEL environments. All of the values and practices that were described in the senior-level roles category apply to presidents (as shown in table 3); however, presidents' unique position gives them access to other equity leadership strategies as well. The symbolic power of presidents in supporting and affirming an SEL approach cannot be overstated. Our findings align with prior research that demonstrated the importance of considering a symbolic leadership frame when reflecting on leadership (Bolman and Deal 2013; Williams 2013). Countless participants in our study described the value of their president openly and explicitly supporting SEL, whether through public messaging, frequent communication on equity issues, connecting the work to the institution's mission, leveraging and funneling resources toward SEL, or using framing or storytelling strategies to describe the work. In our first report on SEL, we described several values and practices that are particularly important for presidents, including *humility*, *cultivating positive relationships*, *listening*, *diminishing hierarchy*, *setting expectations for the long term*, and *implementing new approaches to accountability* (Kezar et al. 2021). Additional data collected since publication of that first report reinforce the importance of a few specific practices for presidents promoting an SEL approach.

Presidents' public-facing roles give them a unique platform from which to communicate important messages and send signals to the campus community about important institutional priorities and values. Presidents can lean on **communication practices** to highlight the importance of their equity agenda and empower leaders across the institution to make progress in the work at hand. As we noted in the first report, *listening* is a key communication practice that presidents employ in order to learn about the lived experiences of students, staff, and faculty from minoritized backgrounds, as well as the needs of campus activists with a history of engagement in equity work. Beyond their listening role, presidents also *use language intentionally* in a couple of important ways. First, they simply talked publicly and regularly about equity and emphasized the importance of everyone on campus taking ownership for equity work. For example, one leader described how their president's frequent and clear messaging about DEI being everyone's work helped her campus spread and distribute the work: "The president of the university made clear that . . . DEI . . . [was] a cornerstone of his presidency. And so it elevates the subject across campus and makes it clear that this is something everybody has to do. It's not just the DEI officers. And then that has trickled down."

Presidents who publicly acknowledged or highlighted existing equity efforts on campus played a powerful role. Doing so showed stakeholders that presidents recognize the work is not new, as well as that they are building on the dedicated efforts of others and also backing them strategically with institutional resources. This strategy promotes buy-in and builds support across campus, while also clearly setting expectations for the long-term vision and direction of the institution. Additionally, presidents can explicitly call out racism or other inequities in their public statements, rather than skirting around the issue or using coded language to describe racism. Many leaders described the power of having a president who was unafraid to publicly name racism and speak out against injustices in bold, unambiguous

terms: “The fact that [our president] speaks about it very strongly, very boldly, candidly talks about racial equity and [asks] where are we looking at race and what we’re doing. I think that absolutely lays the foundation for me to come in and have the conversation and be able to reach out to where we could see our [entire] college as a team [doing equity work together].” As this DEI leader noted, the president’s intentional use of language helps lay the ground-work for a more collaborative approach to equity work on campus that can also welcome necessary healing conversations and work among the campus community.

Presidents also play a key *modeling* role when enacting any of the values and practices associated with SEL. They can set a powerful example for other leaders on campus of what equity leadership can look like. Some participants also mentioned the powerful work of presidents as role models when they spend significant time directly with students or communities that have been traditionally marginalized, as one leader described:

And it happens every week, usually. She goes out there and has conversations with students. So I know that she’s doing that because I see it. And I know the rest of the campus sees it, too. So I don’t mean to be overly dramatic and make a comparison to Gandhi or something, but there’s that quote. “You be the change that you want to see in the world.” And I think she embodies that. And so she sets the tone for the campus. You’ve got a college president who’s going out there and interacting directly with students. And so that tells people without having to tell people this is the way that we behave. This is the way we are with our students. This is our mindset.

This quote indicates just how impactful presidents’ actions can be in setting a tone and creating a culture in support of equity on campus. We understand many campuses may be undertaking their SEL journeys without the direct involvement of their presidents, so we offer this short section on presidents’ roles as a starting point to gain necessary buy-in and support.

## Mid-level Roles

Leaders in mid-level roles have an especially interesting position in that they have characteristics of both top-down and bottom-up leaders. They report upward to more senior leaders and so are constrained in that sense, but they also have others who report to them and thus also hold positions of power. Mid-level leaders include people in positions such as department chairs; assistant or associate deans; directors of units such as centers for teaching and learning, assessment, or institutional research; assistant or associate vice presidents; and, in some cases, deans (as noted above, on some campuses deans are seen as senior-level leaders) (Amey 1999; Amey and Eddy 2018; Eddy, Garza Mitchell, and Amey 2016; Rosser 2000). Mid-level leaders have the challenging role of navigating different values and practices depending on who they are working with at what time. Several leaders described how they might intentionally lean on particular practices with different groups, as this quote indicates:

I will say I’m probably a little bit more mindful of how I approach it with the senior team than I am with my team. . . . That’s what it means to be a senior leader, to do it



in the way that makes the most sense, that encourages space as opposed to encouraging reactions. . . . [with the senior team, I might approach it] like, “Hey—this year’s the year where we’ve had more trans folks of color who have been killed. What if we send a message out about that? How might our students feel about that? Have we asked that question?” I think I ask it much more in a questioning tone . . . Where with my team, I’d be [more direct] like, “Listen, this is the year where more trans folks of color have been killed. Our trans students who are coming in who are of color have a very different experience. I need for you—let’s get caught up on what that experience might be and how might they see us as a place where they can find safety, value, and can let down their guard a little bit and have a conversation with us because we can help with resources.” So, I think I—does that make sense? I code switch.

For this leader, *questioning* was a more effective strategy for raising important issues with senior leaders, whereas he might be more directive with his own staff. And he described his work as a mid-level leader as code-switching, or communicating differently when working with different groups. To that end, mid-level leaders described focusing heavily on **communication practices**, as their position in the middle of the organizational hierarchy involved working with leaders who were not only above and below them, but also those in similar positions laterally. In order to effectively navigate these varied collaborations, mid-level leaders described *using language intentionally*, perhaps shifting the ways in which they frame or describe an issue based on who they are working with (e.g., faculty versus cabinet-level leaders), as this leader described:

[Conversations with senior leaders are about using] data, being informed, making data-driven arguments, doing all the neoliberal things. You strip emotion out of it and you just speak the language of the system, so [having] a data-driven, informed perspective. . . . [you have to] show up [with] some kind of neutered stance to dispassionately frame your arguments, because that’s the language of the normative. I have a really hard time doing that because a lot of the work that we’re talking about is affective. It’s about people’s feelings and experiences that don’t show up on a graph.

This leader described how framing communications or arguments for senior leaders with this sort of quantitative, data-focused language could build trust and help open the door for gently pushing colleagues who might be less inclined to support equity work to a new level of equity-mindedness. Conversely, when communicating with faculty or ground-level leaders who are full-throated supporters of equity work and who, if anything, might feel frustrated by a lack of progress, mid-level leaders felt they could—and should—bring more emotion back into their language in order to more fully honor the complexity of the work. Mid-level leaders also mentioned that *listening* was a key practice in order to truly understand the needs and perspectives of various constituency groups.

Another leader described how *modeling* can work both up and down the organizational hierarchy for mid-level leaders:

My staff, you know, they report to me, and how they act is a reflection on me, just as I’m a reflection on my dean or my chancellor, et cetera, et cetera. So I always try to show people how to act, I guess. And that sounds very draconian, and I don’t mean it that way. I almost feel like it’s like, “No job too big, no job too small,” right? . . .

And this taps into humility, I guess, in some ways, also. I would not ask any one of my staff to do something that I was not willing to do myself. And so I think there's that level of leadership where you're trying to show people how to act and how to behave. . . . I haven't really thought about it from [that perspective of leaders] above [me], but I do think that, you know, whenever you have a leader in the office, you learn what's important to them. You'll learn what's of value to them. And you try to model yourself as well, and you go, "Okay, if this is what's important, I'm going to make that a priority and make that all the way down." So I guess it makes sense, not just me down, but from above me as well, down to myself.

Mid-level leaders *model* the ways they want their staff to operate, but they also see leaders above them *model* important values and practices and absorb those lessons accordingly. Mid-level leaders are also often positioned in ways to take lessons or tips about what has worked well with their team or their staff to other mid-level leaders or to senior leaders in order to help spread good ideas or practices across the institution. They are often on committees or other cross-institutional groups where they come into contact with leaders from many different areas of campus operations. One director of a center for teaching and learning described how she used a lot of capacity-building exercises like book groups and lunchtime discussions to help her staff grow on their personal journeys toward critical consciousness. When in conversation with other leaders across her institution, she was able to point to these examples of what she did with her team as models for other units and departments to use when thinking about how to build capacity.

Mid-level leaders' positions also required them to *welcome disagreements and tensions* and navigate them respectfully. Because these leaders work with such different groups—both above and below them in the organizational hierarchy, as well as lateral—disagreements and conflicting priorities and goals are almost inevitable. Normalizing debate and disagreement and helping colleagues learn how to do this in a respectful and productive way was key for mid-level leaders. Similarly mid-level leaders were also well positioned to *make decisions with a systemic lens*, given their vantage point in the middle of the organization. These leaders often work across multiple units and divisions, and they must be able to see things from the perspective of both senior-level and ground-level leaders, enabling them to identify and connect areas for enhancing collaboration or strengthening the work. For example, one leader who was in charge of faculty development worked with colleagues in the DEI office to ensure that every workshop and faculty development opportunity had DEI content embedded within it, thus making DEI unavoidable for any faculty member seeking to develop their teaching or research skills. This strategy helped make DEI learning systematic for faculty, rather than sporadic.

Finally, *humility* was a key value for mid-level leaders. These leaders often run their own departments, units, or centers. They are used to being in charge in their own space, having autonomy and being "totally in charge . . . [able to] set the tone and . . . make things happen," but they also have to play a more humble and subordinate role with senior leaders sometimes in order to make inroads in terms of DEI. For example, one mid-level leader described how she would sometimes work with senior leaders to implement a new practice and would offer to coordinate logistics or run the planning meetings; she would be fine without taking any credit for making it happen, but she would still know that she played a part in spreading DEI work across the institution.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a mid-level leader, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel mid-level leaders are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a mid-level leader, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## Ground-Level Roles

We did not have as many leaders in our sample in ground-level roles beyond faculty, which were already reviewed in this report, so the ways that ground-level leaders are well positioned to enact different parts of the model were not quite as clear as for other groups. In addition to faculty, ground-level leaders include entry-level staff such as counselors or advisers, administrative assistants, student conduct officers, student activities managers, or academic affairs coordinators. Fortunately, there is already existing work on ground-level leaders, called grassroots leaders in Kezar and Lester's (2011) book on the topic, *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership*. While not exactly the same as the shared equity leadership environments in our study, Kezar and Lester (2011)'s work found that grassroots leaders are often skilled at "creating an ideology and vision, raising consciousness and awareness of the problem, empowering others to act despite organizational opposition, and building relationships with others" (Kezar and Lester 2011, 98). These leaders used strategies rooted in the culture of academia to promote change, including organizing intellectual opportunities, professional development, leveraging curriculum and using the classroom as a forum, mentoring, hiring like-minded colleagues, obtaining grants, using data, joining committees, and partnering with other stakeholders (Kezar and Lester 2011).

Similarly, we found that ground-level leaders in SEL environments are especially effective in enacting **relational practices** and **developmental practices**, and they leveraged existing structures and forums to enact them. One leader described how she and a group of her colleagues (other ground-level leaders) facilitated a campus-wide discussion around their equity strategic plan and how fellow faculty and staff were more receptive to the presentation given their roles:

And it was [our] team that was facilitating that presentation or that kind of workshop with the college community and we got some feedback that it changed that particular conversation and was really impactful because having us up there like talking to our colleagues that we have relationships with in a really honest and open way landed on them differently than slides of numbers and graphs [or] senior leadership telling them what they should be doing or thinking. . . . And hearing that come from us as their colleagues shifted the direction the conversation was going.

This example shows how ground-level leaders are well positioned to *help others learn* in a way that might not be as well received coming from senior leaders. Their on-the-ground experience working directly with students or implementing policies and practices gives them both knowledge and credibility to *help their colleagues learn*.



Additionally, these leaders often have long-standing *relationships* across campus and have *built trust* with one another, which allows them to have a stronger influence on their colleagues with regard to equity issues. The *relationships and trust* are particularly important in crisis situations, such as after a racist incident on campus. Several ground-level leaders described how the actions of senior leaders in the wake of such traumatic events often felt disconnected or out of touch, whereas ground-level leaders who have built strong connections with students as well as others around campus and in the community were better able to connect with the type of response that was needed in the moment. One faculty leader described how they—rather than senior leaders—ended up facilitating a community forum in the wake of a racist incident on campus and how much better that process felt than past attempts at processing and healing after crises.

We also saw that ground-level leaders embodied the value of *creativity and imagination* as they engaged in SEL. Ground-level leaders called on *creativity and imagination* when imagining how day-to-day practices could be informed by their on-the-ground experiences and transformed to better reflect equity goals. For example, one leader described how her experiences overseeing student workers helped her revise a previously volunteer student ambassador position into a paid role for students that could use federal work-study funds, opening up the opportunity to students from a much broader range of economic backgrounds. This same leader was also able to expand the program during the onset of the pandemic by creating “technology ambassadors” to help students navigate the transition to virtual coursework; this both supported students taking virtual classes and expanded the pool of students working and getting paid during a time when they desperately needed extra financial support.

Recognizing the ways in which ground-level leaders are positioned to enact certain values and practices most effectively in particular situations can help campuses working to enact SEL benefit from the expertise and experiences of these leaders. In future research, we hope to learn more about these ground-level leaders’ experiences and strengths in shared equity leadership environments.

## Reflection Questions

1. *As a ground-level leader, which examples of values and practices described in this section resonate most with you? Which ones feel less relevant for you? Reflect on why that is.*
2. *Are there other values and practices not described here that you feel ground-level leaders are particularly well positioned to enact in an SEL environment?*
3. *If you are not a ground-level leader, how have you seen or how could you see leaders in these positions leveraging their role to enhance SEL efforts?*

## Conclusion

Shared equity leadership (SEL) includes more people in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion, distributing leadership responsibilities and processes throughout an organization rather than concentrating it in a single department or role. As more people become engaged in this work, we need to pay more attention to the ways that people with different roles are uniquely positioned to contribute to this work in different ways. While the SEL model is universal regardless of where leaders are situated in the institutional hierarchy, the unique nuances of power, authority, relationships, and status influence the ways in which leaders at different levels of the organization might embody particular values or enact particular practices.

We found some differences in the ways that academic leaders and faculty emphasized or leaned into different values and practices, compared with people holding different kinds of staff roles based on their expertise or experiences. We also found variations in the ways that leaders at different levels of the organizational hierarchy were able to embody values or enact practices salient to them based on the differing bases of power and authority they have. However, this work is still very much emergent and there is still much to be learned about how those in different roles can best contribute to an SEL effort. Further, individuals hold multiple overlapping and intersecting roles—for example, an academic affairs leader might be a mid-level or senior-level leader, or a ground-level leader might hold a role in a field with historical and persistent legacies of exclusion. Leaders' races, genders, and other identities also influence the ways that they inhabit all of these roles, the ways they are perceived in the roles they inhabit, and the practices and values they are able to enact. Finally, reflecting on how roles can differentially shape engagement with the SEL model can help individuals think about equity leadership in their own locus of control or sphere of influence—even if their entire institution is not necessarily practicing SEL. Thinking about the values and practices an individual leader is well positioned to enact based on their multiple intersecting and overlapping roles can help campuses advance equity leadership from anywhere within the organization.





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